



2019 Military Service Gender Relations Focus Groups

Active Duty

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Ms. Lisa Davis was the government project manager for this effort. The lead analysts on this assessment were Ms. Amanda Barry and Ms. Jess Tercha of Fors Marsh Group, LLC. Ms. Ariel Hill, Mr. William X. Klauberg, Ms. Alycia White, Ms. Brittany Owen and Ms. Kathryn Rehberg assisted in data analysis and the preparation of the content for this report. Dr. Ashlea Klahr and Ms. Lisa Davis assisted with the review of this report. Policy officials contributing to the development of focus group content included Dr. Nathan Galbreath and Ms. Anita Boyd (Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office). We would like to thank all of the individuals at each installation who assisted us in organizing the focus groups, as well as all of the active duty Service members, Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR)/Sexual Harassment/Assault Response & Prevention (SHARP) responders, and legal staff who graciously shared their time and experiences with us.

The data collection team consisted of Ms. Amanda Barry, Mr. William X. Klauberg, Ms. Rachel Wynn, Ms. Alycia White, Mr. Hunter Peebles, Ms. Kinsey Gimble, Ms. Mallory Mann, Mr. Sam Evans, Ms. Panne Burke, Mr. Brock Brothers, and Ms. Rachel Ingersoll of Fors Marsh Group, LLC.

Executive Summary

The *2019 Military Service Gender Relations Focus Groups (2019 MSGR)* report reflects the overall perceptions and findings gleaned from active duty Service members and Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR)/Sexual Harassment/Assault Response & Prevention (SHARP) SAPR/SHARP responders who participated in focus groups in eight locations around the continental United States (CONUS). Participants in these focus groups were asked about the culture of their installation and who influences the culture for Service members, the influence of gender discrimination and sexual harassment on work culture and morale, and how leadership and the SAPR/SHARP responder can better prevent and respond to incidents of sexual assault and sexual harassment reported by Service members. The goal of this report is to provide an overview and summary of key themes that arose from the discussions with Service members and SAPR/SHARP responders.

Methodology

Sixty-one focus groups were conducted in the fall of 2019 across eight CONUS locations. A total of 493 active duty Service members and SAPR/SHARP responder staff participated in the 2019 focus groups. Sessions were conducted by trained focus group moderators in closed-door conference rooms or offices at each of the locations and lasted under 90 minutes. Using a focus group guide and protocol, moderators led the discussions, which covered topics about workplace culture, locations where Service members are at increased risk of sexual assault and/or sexual harassment, and insights on how Service leadership and SAPR/SHARP can better support sexual assault prevention efforts. Of note, the input provided by participants is not generalizable to the entire force and do not reflect views representative of the force. However, the input provided by participants provides useful insight to the Department of Defense (DoD) on perceptions and understanding of DoD policies and practices.

Summary of Themes

The perspectives of the Service members and SAPR/SHARP personnel who participated in the fall 2019 focus groups are instrumental to our understanding of the experience of male and female Service members navigating their workplace culture and our analysis of the policies and security measures designed to keep them safe and to provide a productive workplace for them. The *2019 MSGR* set out to provide insights into key questions around factors that contribute to the culture around sexual assault and sexual harassment in the military workplace. Key themes from these discussions are provided below.

Perceptions of Workplace Culture

What role does leadership play in influencing culture?

Leadership has a fundamental role in setting the tone for workplace culture within their unit. Positive leadership will create a positive workplace culture, whereas negative leadership will create a negative and occasionally toxic workplace culture for their subordinates. Leaders who set the example for how Service members should behave and engage directly with their

subordinates are generally perceived as creating a positive standard for what is acceptable in the workplace. By communicating with their subordinates on a person-to-person level—deemed being an “intrusive leader”—participants said it demonstrates that the leaders care about their unit, which results in stronger morale and cohesion among unit members.

Contrary to positive leadership attributes that dictate workplace culture, participants indicated that leaders who allow inappropriate behaviors to persist and who participants perceived to not care about preventing sexual assault and sexual harassment create an unhealthy environment for coworkers, lowers the standard for acceptable behaviors, and allows for the escalation of inappropriate behaviors, such as lewd comments and jokes. To create a more positive workplace culture in their units, participants identified these actions as an area for improvement among leaders.

What influences culture for younger Service members?

Participants indicated a variety of Service members within the chain of command have some role in influencing the behavior and workplace experiences of younger Service members (17- to 24-years old). Most notably, non-commissioned officers (NCO) at the middle and junior enlisted levels were described as being particularly significant sources of influence for junior enlisted personnel, as NCOs are in positions that junior enlisted Service members aspire to hold during their careers. Specific NCO positions of influence included team leaders and gunnery sergeants. Participants said that NCOs influence the general behavior, speech, and actions of younger Service members. Just below the NCOs are other enlisted Service members at the E-4 rank, known as the “E-4 mafia.” Participants also indicated that E-4 ranking Service members are influential for younger Service members and were described as being relatable in age and experience, but are not in a codified leadership position, so they are in close contact and carry out duties alongside younger Service members. Participants also identified supervisors, sponsors and officers as having some influence over younger Service members, although they were not seen as having as much influence as the NCOs and E-4 ranking Service members.

Outside of middle- to lower-level leadership, participants recognized peers as having a significant influence on younger Service members due to their consistently close proximity while living together in barracks or being coworkers. In the workplace, the most influential peers may be Service members who are the most technically proficient at their occupation, since they are respected for their skill set by younger Service members who aspire for the same level of proficiency. Outside of the military, participants acknowledged other influences on younger Service members, such as family members and beliefs from their upbringing that they bring with them when they enter the military.

What factors contribute to a positive workplace culture?

Focus group participants frequently identified factors that build the groundwork for a positive workplace culture, including the treatment of peers and coworkers, maintaining good relationships, and respectability. Participants identified strong communication between coworkers as paving the way for positive workplace culture and setting the tone for the relationships between Service members. Participants indicated that good communication among Service members allows for a stronger sense of trust, transparency, and approachability within a

unit, which some participants said makes them feel as though they are tight-knit and family-oriented within their workplace. Participants said that a strong sense of camaraderie and teamwork also aids in a productive unit and work environment, allowing Service members to work more effectively and build trust with each other. Participants also emphasized that respect for peers and the chain of command is as an essential part of a positive workplace and that without respect, communication will not be effective. Although character traits were a large part of the discussions on a positive workplace, the practice of holding Service members accountable for their actions was identified as a pertinent factor that also contributes to a positive workplace. When Service members are held accountable, it stops negative behaviors in the workplace from continuing to occur.

What factors contribute to a poor workplace culture?

Negative and toxic traits were acknowledged to be significant contributors towards a poor workplace culture. As strong communication and respect supports a positive workplace culture, participants identified weak communication and a perceived lack of respect for Service members of lower ranks as contributing to poor workplace culture and potentially leading to confrontation between peers. When Service members lack good communication, there is confusion about completing tasks and a lack of teamwork. Moreover, a lack of trust among Service members contributes to depleting morale and camaraderie among Service members. Participants identified that micromanagement from leaders demonstrates a lack of trust in Service members' capabilities to perform and that it creates a toxic work environment that prevents individual growth. In contrast to camaraderie as a positive workplace attribute, favoritism and cliques in the workplace further divide Service members and result in exclusion, gossip, and a hostile work environment. Likewise, unresponsiveness toward inappropriate behaviors and a lack of discipline were also identified as contributing to a hostile and toxic environment in the workplace.

Characteristics of Unwanted Gender-Related Experiences in the Workplace

How do Service members experience gender discrimination at installations?

Although some male participants highlighted their female leadership as evidence that gender discrimination is not an issue at their installation, other male and female participants noted that gender discrimination at their installation or in their unit manifests in a number of different ways. Participants pointed to differences in physical fitness standards, female Service members' inaccessibility to certain "working" jobs, and leadership favoritism of one gender over the other as recurring issues faced by male and female Service members. Separation by gender frequently creates a tension as Service members vie for the same jobs, duties or promotions. Embodying different standards can create the perception that a promotion is not earned or that someone was placed in a particular job based on their gender rather than their qualifications. Some participants pointed to their perception that female Service members manipulate male Service members and/or military systems to get ahead or avoid deployment. These perceptions only add to workplace hostility and may continue systemic gender discrimination rather than to dispel gender-based misperceptions and bolster workplace camaraderie.

What does sexual harassment look like at installations?

In general, participants indicated that sexual harassment at their installations includes lower level behaviors such as staring, gawking, making sexual jokes or comments, sharing explicit images, and repeated attempts at unwanted relationships. However, sexual harassment is not always identified correctly, and definitions of sexual harassment can differ among genders. Participants expressed that lower level sexual harassment behaviors are not always properly addressed when they occur due to Service members' perceptions that the behaviors are not serious or are harmless. Although there are difficulties in properly identifying behaviors as sexual harassment, participants noted positive changes in sexual harassment culture at their installations. Behaviors that were once seen as admissible and a normal part of the "good old boys' club" culture, such as lewd comments or staring and gawking, are becoming less acceptable, and Service members are better able to hold their peers accountable for such inappropriate language and behavior.

Where do Service members face sexual harassment and sexual assault?

When asked to identify locations where Service members have witnessed or are aware of risky behavior occurring, participants identified various locations both on- and off-base. In general, the barracks were acknowledged as an area where alcohol use, sexual assault and sexual harassment occur due to the privacy of the rooms and being in close proximity to other Service members. Participants noted that the barracks are a known gathering spot for younger Service members to engage in alcohol use, resulting in cases of sexual assault. In addition to the barracks, other forms of military housing, such as off-base apartments and military housing, were identified as areas where risky behaviors and sexual harassment occur. The gym was also frequently mentioned where staring, gawking, and unwanted touching occur, so much so that some participants indicated leaving the gym, working out with others, or exercising during later hours. Other on-base non-living areas that were identified as locations where risky behaviors and sexual harassment occur included on-base recreational areas, schoolhouses, and commissaries.

When discussing off-base areas where risky and other unwanted behaviors may occur, participants indicated having witnessed or being aware of behaviors occurring at bars, house parties, hotel parties, and other environments where alcohol is present and that have less physical security than on-base.

What are some common characteristics of sexual assault cases?

SAPR/SHARP responder participants identified common characteristics of alleged offenders, installation location and population, the role of alcohol, and social media in cases of sexual assault. In general, SAPR/SHARP responder participants indicated that cases of sexual assault that they have seen involved an alleged offender that the victim had a preexisting relationship with or involved someone in a position of authority over the victim. When discussing installation-specific characteristics, SAPR/SHARP responder participants discussed that alcohol is a prevalent factor of sexual assault cases for outside of continental U.S. (OCONUS) locations and CONUS locations in rural or isolated areas. Feelings of isolation among Service members coupled with a lack of available recreational activities lead Service members to turn to drinking as an activity, which in turn can lead to other risky behaviors.

SAPR/SHARP responder participants also discussed how cases of sexual assault frequently involve younger Service members and often occur under similar circumstances. Cases involving younger Service members were identified as frequently involving alcohol or underage drinking. In general, younger Service members are perceived as engaging in higher alcohol consumption, which is attributed to them being away from home without their families for the first time and having little mobility, which motivates them to turn to alcohol and partying as activities. However, cases involving underage drinking also involve a reluctance to come forward due to fears of collateral misconduct violations. In addition, there remains confusion among Service members about consent, particularly when the victim and/or alleged perpetrator report alcohol use.

Some gender differences were observed as commonly appearing in cases of sexual assault, particularly in cases involving male victims. Sexual assault cases involving male victims were described as hazing more often than cases involving female victims. Moreover, SAPR/SHARP responders said that male victims experience male-specific stigmas of masculinity and an overarching difficulty identifying as a victim, which creates unique barriers to reporting their experiences.

The presence of social media was also discussed as a characteristic of sexual assault cases. Since dating apps and social media are frequently used to meet up with other Service members, SAPR/SHARP responder participants indicated encountering cases in which Service members meet for the first time in person and an unwanted sexual act occurs.

Sexual Assault Prevention and Response

How can the sexual assault prevention program be improved?

Participants expressed that improvements in prevention efforts could be made by leadership as well as in SAPR/SHARP trainings. Participants expressed views that leadership's efforts to address sexual assault are often reactionary rather than preventative in nature, which participants expressed does not aid in preventing sexual assault, especially when efforts are geared toward what to do when sexual assault occurs. Additionally, participants expressed that leadership's "mission-first" mentality neglects prevention efforts and that there should be more consistent prioritization of sexual assault prevention as a mission critical issue.

Participants said SAPR/SHARP trainings are redundant and unengaging and are typically performed by way of PowerPoint or an instructor who lacks expertise in the subject area. Participants recommended enacting small group discussions more frequently, using relatable content, hearing from experts in the field, and making trainings more engaging for Service members. Positive training experiences included small group discussions, skits and role plays, and an emphasis on content areas and skills training particular to bystander intervention and alcohol education. Some participants commented on how training content is centered on male perpetrators and female victims and suggested including more discussions of other gender scenarios to break the stigma of male victims. SAPR/SHARP responder participants recommended incorporating trainings on how to have healthy relationships based on the common characteristics of sexual assault cases, including misunderstandings and trespassing on personal boundaries in both platonic and romantic relationships.

How can sexual assault reporting mechanisms be improved?

Participants recommended improving reporting by creating more awareness of the reporting options available and increasing trust in confidentiality and the criminal justice system. With knowledge gaps on mandatory reporting, participants recommended increasing the visibility of SAPR/SHARP personnel and victim advocates (VA) so Service members become more aware of who they can disclose their experience to without it resulting in an unwanted unrestricted report and to ensure they can maintain control over their reporting process. Furthermore, improving the relationships that VAs have with their peers and coworkers was identified as being potentially helpful for strengthening the reporting process. Participants also suggested including more anonymous reporting options to mitigate issues in reporting confidentiality as participants noted that others will find out about another Service member's report once it is filed, and they.

What Has Changed Over Time?

Unlike quantitative survey research, qualitative studies, such as focus groups and interviews, are not typically designed to demonstrate changes over time. Because focus groups are discussion based, different groups—even those with participants of similar backgrounds—will not address all of the same subjects or will not be able to answer all of the same questions. In addition, focus group participants are not asked specifically to report changes that they have noticed about focus group topics over time. Despite these limitations, a few themes emerged from the *2019 MSGR* focus groups that differed from past focus group efforts:

- Participants in the active duty Service member and SAPR/SHARP responder focus groups noted that the prevalence of ride-sharing apps (e.g., Uber, Lyft) have, for many Service members, eliminated the need for a designated driver (DD) or a sober friend when planning a night of drinking. This leaves some Service members unprotected or at risk, whereas in the past, they might have had the added layer of protection of a sober peer to watch their back.
- Focus group participants noted that unit cohesion and camaraderie at OCONUS installations are much higher than in their CONUS posts. They noted that team building feels less forced and OCONUS installations instill a sense of family in units, a theme that was not strongly articulated in previous focus groups.

Of note, these themes may not represent all of the changes focus group participants may be privy to with regard to risky behavior or policy; however, these are themes that stood out compared to themes of previous reports.

Synopsis

Focus group participants shared their experiences and perceptions of gender relations on military installations. Participants shared their perspectives on a continuum of workplace factors that lead to positive and negative workplace cultures, as well as their experience with, or perception of, gender discrimination. Male and female participants pointed out that gender discrimination may appear as favoritism for one gender over the other, such as female Service members' inaccessibility to particular occupations, or some Service members manipulating the system for

special accommodations based on gender rather than qualifications or needs. Inequality, or even perceived inequality, can intensify tensions between genders and ultimately lead to poor morale and/or a hostile work environment.

Participants provided recommendations for improving sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention and reporting trainings to make them more engaging, particularly for younger Service members. Positive training experiences included small group discussions, skits and role plays, and an emphasis on content areas and skills training particular to bystander intervention and alcohol education. Participants pointed out that the delivery of the trainings is often more important than the content itself; younger Service members often take their lead from how their leadership delivers trainings, discusses difficult or uncomfortable topic matter, and how inappropriate behavior is enforced. Younger Service members are most influenced by their mid-level leadership, NCOs and supervisors, and their peers, making discussions and trainings with these groups integral to shaping appropriate behaviors at the start of their careers.

As in previous years, participants reiterated the pervasive confusion and misunderstanding related to defining and identifying sexual harassment. They noted that the lack of consistent enforcement of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination policies belay the importance of these rules, add to the confusion regarding inappropriate behavior, and undermine trust in leadership. Participants shared their knowledge of the reporting options and pointed out that there is still confusion among their peers about with whom they can file a restricted report. Their greatest concerns with regard to reporting are maintaining anonymity—citing a perceived lack of confidentiality when reporting to their leadership—and the fear of retaliation.

The body of this report contains detailed summaries of these key themes as well as others that emerged from the focus group discussions. Although the findings and key themes in this report are not generalizable to the Services as a whole, this report does represent a wealth of information, leading to a better understanding and insights into Department of Defense (DoD) sexual assault and sexual harassment programs and policies.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Department of Defense (DoD) strives to provide a safe, healthy, and productive working environment for all its personnel. Working with the Services and the DoD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO), the Department has implemented programs aimed at reducing sexual assault and sexual harassment while updating reporting and victim care procedures. Recurring evaluations of the gender relations environment through ongoing mixed-methods research (i.e., surveys and focus groups) inform the development of improvements to the policies, procedures, and trainings aimed at reducing instances of sexual assault and sexual harassment and advancing care for victims.

Focus groups are one evaluation tool used to collect qualitative feedback from active duty Service members on the gender relations environment in the military. Section 577 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2005 required the Secretary of Defense to develop a comprehensive policy to assess the DoD's response to sexual assaults involving members of the Armed Forces. Subsequent policy established SAPRO and provided the Secretary of Defense with a recurring evaluation of the services and resources provided to military members who have reported sexual assault to DoD authorities. The Health and Resilience (H&R) Research Division within the Office of People Analytics (OPA) conducts annual assessments with an alternating cycle of focus groups and surveys, providing qualitative and quantitative data to the Secretary of Defense and the Services.

This report offers findings from the *2019 Military Service Gender Relations (2019 MSGR) Focus Groups* among active duty members. This is the fourth administration of gender relations focus groups, with prior efforts conducted in 2014, 2015, and 2017. This introductory chapter provides background on why these focus groups were conducted, a review of the methodology used to administer the focus groups and analyze the data, an overview of the report, and an introduction to key terms. References to perpetrator/offender/the accused throughout this report should be interpreted as “alleged perpetrator,” “alleged offender,” or “alleged accused.” Without knowing the specific outcomes of particular allegations, the presumption of innocence applies unless there is an adjudication of guilt. References to “discrimination,” “retaliation,” “reprisal,” “ostracism,” or “maltreatment,” or perceptions thereof, are based on negative behaviors as discussed by focus group participants; without knowing more about the specifics of particular cases or reports, this data should not be construed as substantiated allegations of retaliation, reprisal, ostracism, or maltreatment. Therefore, no legal conclusions can be drawn on whether behaviors discussed by participants meet the definition of an offense having been committed.

Methodology

OPA conducted 61 focus groups¹ on gender relations with active duty Service members across four Services (Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force) from October 10, 2019, to November 15, 2019. The Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force each selected two installations, and the Army

¹ Eight focus groups were conducted at each location per Service, with the exception of the Army where only 5 groups were held at Joint Base San Antonio.

selected four installations for data collection. All installations were located in the continental United States (CONUS). Because Service members at training installations may face a particular risk of sexual assault and sexual harassment, key stakeholders—which included OPA, SAPRO, and the Services—selected Joint Base San Antonio (*Army*), Joint Expeditionary Base—Little Creek (*Navy*), Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms (*Marine Corps*), and Goodfellow Air Force Base (*Air Force*) to learn more about this target group. The installations sampled and the numbers of participants by Service and gender are represented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Number of Participants by Service and Gender

Service	Installations	Male Participants	Female Participants	Total ^b
Army	DMV ^a	48	28	115
	Joint Base San Antonio (JBSA)			
Navy	Joint Expeditionary Base – Little Creek	56	42	133
	Naval Air Station Jacksonville			
Marine Corps	Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms	52	47	135
	Marine Corps Air Station Miramar			
Air Force	Goodfellow Air Force Base	41	37	110
	Langley Air Force Base			

^aIncludes installations located in the DC-Maryland-Virginia area (Fort Belvoir, Fort Meade, Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall)

^bThe total column represents the sum of the participants from male and female groups plus the number of participants from mixed gender groups.

Although the results cannot be generalized to the total population of the Services, they provide insights into issues and ideas for further consideration. Data collection was discussion-based, therefore, although many subjects were addressed, not all questions were asked in all groups, and not all participants were able to answer each question. Procedures for selecting participants, developing the focus group guides, conducting the groups, and analyzing the data are described below. The focus group procedures were reviewed by a DoD Human Subjects Protection Officer as part of the DoD survey approval and licensing process.

Participants

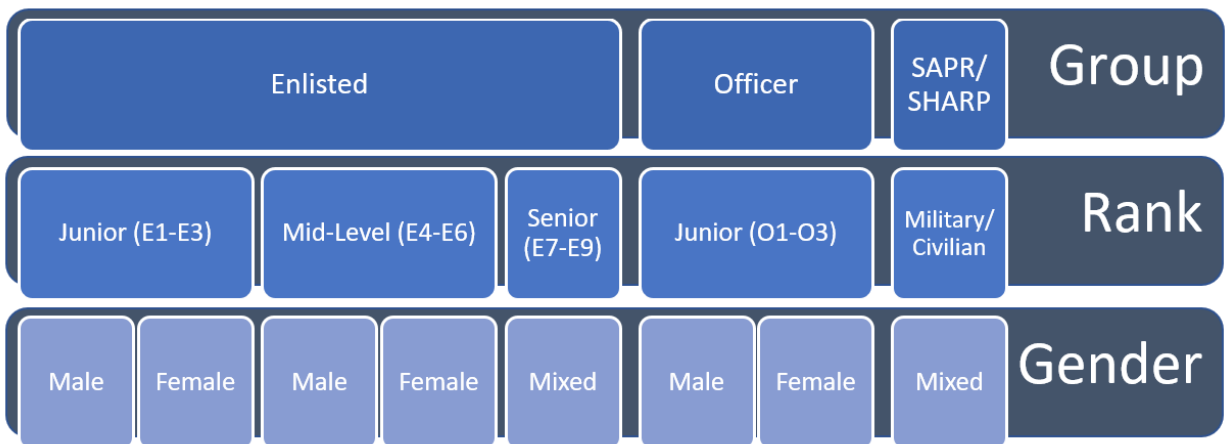
In 2019, OPA introduced an additional target population for focus groups, Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR)/Sexual Harassment/Assault Response & Prevention (SHARP) personnel and legal responders. These individuals provided a highly valuable “on the ground” perspective of the military’s sexual assault prevention and response systems. In addition, in a departure from prior years, OPA divided mid-level enlisted (E4—E6) Service members from more senior enlisted groups (E7—E9), based on feedback received from the Services. This allowed mid-level enlisted Service members to speak more freely about their experiences,

SAPR/SHARP Responder Group

New this year, the SAPR/SHARP responder groups included participants who are responders to sexual assault. Participants included civilian and active duty personnel who are first responders (e.g., SARCs, VAs, healthcare personnel, law enforcement, MCIOs) or other responders (e.g., judge advocates, chaplains) to active duty personnel reporting a sexual assault.

without their more senior colleagues in the room, and thus provided a new level of richness to our understanding of workplace culture from the Service members’ perspective. Enlisted and officer Service members across paygrades were selected from the general population at each installation and may or may not have had direct experience with sexual assault and/or sexual harassment. Service members who were recruited volunteered to participate in one of eight focus groups held at each of the locations. Focus groups were broken out by gender² and pay grade. See Figure 1 for the demographic layout of the conducted focus groups.

Figure 1.
Participant Group Breakdowns



Participants were recruited via e-mail or word of mouth by personnel at each location. Each Service installation supplied OPA with a roster of all eligible participants. After randomizing

² Due to a limited maximum number of focus groups, Senior Enlisted and SAPR/SHARP personnel groups were not broken out by gender.

each list within clusters defined by gender and pay grade, the rosters were returned to each installation's point of contact. Each Service installation was responsible for recruiting the first available 12 active duty Service members to participate in the appropriate session. Each installation was required to emphasize that participation was voluntary, and participants were able to discontinue participation in the study at any time. For this reason, the size of the sessions varied. The breakout for each group by gender and pay grade can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2.
Participant Counts by Gender and Pay Grade

Pay Grade/Group	Male Participants	Female Participants	Total
Junior Enlisted (E1–E3)	80	61	141
Mid-level Enlisted (E4–E6)	59	51	110
Senior Enlisted (E7–E9) ^a			59
Junior Office (O1–O3)	58	42	100
SAPR/SHARP Responders ^a			83
Total^b	197	154	493

^a Senior Enlisted groups and SAPR/SHARP responder groups were mixed gender. Counts by gender are unavailable for these groups.

^b Total will not be the sum of the male and female participants columns due to the inclusion of mixed groups in the totals.

Development of the Guide

Working with SAPRO to identify topics of interest, OPA analysts created the initial drafts of the focus group protocols. OPA incorporated collaborative feedback from SAPRO, the Office of Force Resiliency (OFR), and the Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ODEI) before finalizing the focus group guides. The guides were broken into three key sections, customized to be relevant to active duty Service members or to SAPR/SHARP responders. Subtopics and themes are summarized in the figure below.

Figure 2.
Key Topics in Focus Group Guides

Active Duty	SAPR/SHARP
• Understanding the installation's culture • Locations of risky behaviors • Characteristics of positive and toxic workplaces • Improving workplace culture • Who creates culture • Influencers of younger Service members • Role models • Prevention • Leadership's efforts to prevent sexual assault • Areas for improvement • SAPR/SHARP's role in culture	• Understanding the installation's cases • Locations of risky behaviors • Common themes/characteristics • Impact of alcohol, social media • Reporting and response • Common themes/characteristics in reporting • Training and programs • Prevention • Leadership's efforts to prevent sexual assault • Areas for improvement • SAPR/SHARP's role in culture

The focus group guide for active duty Service members can be found in Appendix A and the focus group guide for SAPR/SHARP responders can be found in Appendix B.

In addition to the conversation guide, several discussion-stimulating activities were included focus groups. Activities included asking participants to “grade” their unit and command leadership on their handling of sexual assault response and prevention, as well as “mapping” areas on- and immediately off-base where they had heard of, or witnessed, risky behaviors occurring. Active duty focus group participants were also asked to identify factors that can create a positive or negative workplace culture. Table 3 breaks down the activities that were conducted with focus group participants. Handouts for the activities can be found in Appendix C.

Figure 3.
Focus Group Activities

Activity	Group Type	Description
Grading on Leadership Sexual Assault Prevention	Active duty and SAPR/SHARP Responder	Participants were asked to grade different levels of leadership on their handling of issues related to sexual assault. Moderators probed on the reason behind the grade and what leaders could do to improve their grade.
Mapping Risky Behaviors	Active Duty and SAPR/SHARP Responder	Participants were asked to place a range of risky behaviors on a map of their installation. Behaviors included but were not limited to witnessing sexual harassment, alcohol use getting out of hand, and areas where sexual assaults have occurred.
Sticky Note Culture	Active Duty only	Participants were asked write both negative and positive factors contributing to the health of a workplace on sticky notes.

Conducting the Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted on site at each installation in closed-door conference rooms or classrooms. Sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes, and facilitators trained in focus group moderation and sensitive topics led the sessions. Groups were led by facilitators of the same gender (i.e., male groups were led by a male facilitator and female groups were led by a female facilitator). Focus group moderators reiterated that participation in the groups was voluntary; participants were informed that any obligation to attend the group was fulfilled by entering the session and that they were free to leave at any time. Focus group sessions were recorded using digital audio recorders and were later transcribed offsite. Audio tapes were destroyed 90 days after they were transcribed. Each focus group was attended by a coordinating staff person who ensured that the groups ran to time, answered project-specific questions for each of the groups, and recorded notes and assertions to aid the coding team.

Analysis

Data from the focus groups were analyzed using analytic induction,³ a multistep method. First, the data were organized by installation, removing any personally identifiable information (PII) or other identifying information. Next, using qualitative analysis software (NVivo), the team coded data into key themes and analysts developed assertions, which stated possible findings.

Transcripts were independently coded and verified by two analysts to avoid individual bias. Once the data were compiled for each assertion, researchers determined whether to keep, revise, or eliminate the findings based on the support and contradictions for the assertion. Assertions are summarized in the subsequent chapters of this report with quotes exemplifying key findings

³ Erikson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M.C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, (3rd ed., pp.119–161).

reached through the analytic induction process.⁴ This report offers an overview of findings across all installations and Services. Service-specific assertions are noted when necessary.

Report Structure

Findings are presented across groups (e.g., gender, rank) with key differences between groups called out where appropriate. Each chapter provides a distinct narrative based on key themes and focus group findings:

- Chapter 2 provides an overview of the key factors and influencers of workplace culture in the military, as well as the perceived negative impact of gender discrimination in the workplace;
- Chapter 3 provides perceptions of why sexual harassment continues in the workplace, a summary of the characteristics of locations where risky/problematic behaviors occur, and the characteristics common to sexual assault cases reported to SAPR/SHARP responders;
- Chapter 4 provides an overview of participants' perceptions of leadership and SAPR/SHARP effectiveness as well as proposed areas for improvement; and
- Chapter 5 provides a discussion of key themes, limitations, and future directions for research.

⁴ For clarity throughout the report, filler words (e.g., “like,” “um,” “you know,” “yeah”) were removed from quotations and explicit words were removed and replaced with [explicit].

Chapter 2: Perceptions of Workplace Culture

Participants shared their insights on what shapes workplace culture, specifically the factors and indicators of a positive or negative command climate; what and who have the biggest influences on Service members, particularly younger Service members; and whether gender discrimination has shaped their experience in the military. Participants were asked to consider the role of unit- and Service-level leadership in shaping command climate and to identify how their workplace culture may lead to sexual assault and sexual harassment and how those risks might be mitigated by leadership.

Because workplace culture has been shown to be related to the factors that increase risk for sexual assault and sexual harassment (OPA, 2019b), participants were asked how their military leadership influences their military workplace culture. All enlisted and officer participants were also asked how their military leaders impact their work climate in general, what things their military leadership does well, and what areas could be improved.

Leadership's Role in Setting Workplace Culture

Military leaders have a great deal of authority and generally set the tone for their unit's workplace culture. Indeed, part of their directive as leaders is to ensure a healthy and positive workplace culture for their unit. Participants with leadership responsibilities discussed how their role in setting workplace culture differs from the roles of individuals with a higher or lower rank. Officer participants described their role in influencing workplace culture as setting examples for others and directing the goals of the unit, and participants who were enlisted leaders discussed having more of a hands-on role in their unit's culture. Not only did enlisted leaders in the focus groups describe setting examples through good behavior and compliance with rules, but they also said they are responsible for directly correcting inappropriate behavior among enlisted members of the unit.

"I put caring leadership because as leaders you have to actually care about the troops... going the extra step and actually trying to make their life better changes the whole work environment. Because you have some people like, 'I don't care about your problems, blah blah blah,' and they just have no respect. But then when you're the person that actually tries to care and make things better, you get the respect. So, it just creates a better atmosphere as a whole."

— **Marine Corps, Senior Enlisted**

Participants discussed the positive role leadership plays in their unit's culture, identifying ways in which leadership addresses issues quickly, expresses care for their unit, sets good examples for subordinates, and corrects inappropriate behavior. However, some discussions identified areas for improvement with regard to leadership, specifically that leaders feel overwhelmed with the amount of collateral duties they are assigned, that poor leadership can set a bad example that trickles down through the unit and that military culture should be changing faster and still has a long way to go.

“So, I think its supervisors and LPOs [i.e., lead petty officers] and ‘khakis’ [referring to Chief’s mess, particularly senior enlisted Sailors] setting the standard and holding it. And I will stand by my second class all day. If they’d put out something and if I hear somebody going against them, standby. But not all supervisors are like that.” — Navy, Mid-Enlisted, Female

Participant Satisfaction with Unit Culture

Participants discussed the positive aspects of leadership with regard to the military workplace culture. One aspect of leadership that participants discussed was how leadership is quick to address issues in their units. Many participants credited their leadership with being involved with their unit and supportive of subordinates. Participants further emphasized the importance of transparency between leadership and subordinates, pointing out that, without being provided even limited context, Service members may perceive direction and discipline as harsh or “inhumane.”

“I always constantly remind my junior Marines that you are an individual, before you are a Marine. Don’t let any people belittle you and stuff like that. And the reason why I say that is because when they understand that, they have more respect of you as a leader, and that ties into that camaraderie and everyone starts to have that common mutual respect for one another...empowering them to make decisions, instead of you making it seem like a dictatorship.”

— Marine Corps, Mid-Enlisted, Male

“Throughout all Navy leadership, I think they try really hard without dehumanizing all their Sailors, because you can only take so much [explicit] away before you start getting into, this is work. You’re doing nothing but living, eating, breathing work. Because, you’ve got to have some fun, you can’t just take away everything, and expect someone to want to come into work, or join the military, because that’s just inhumane, I guess. No better than prison.”

— Navy, Junior Enlisted, Male

Perceived Areas for Improvement

Although participants described military leaders as having many positive impacts on the military workplace culture, some discussions identified areas for potential improvements. Participants discussed the importance of leaders holding others accountable for inappropriate behavior which may include poor communication or demeaning comments. Participants also mentioned the importance of leadership enforcing high standards for behavior, and addressing even minor infractions, because minor behaviors may escalate to more serious inappropriate behaviors.

“Reminding leadership across the board that every time you pass something that you know is wrong and you don’t correct it, you lower the bar... Every time you don’t correct something, you lower the bar, you lower the standard. Every time that standard gets lowered, it’s just the norm, and that’s the new expectation.”

— Marine Corps, Mid-Enlisted, Female

Participants also discussed their perception that leadership can become overwhelmed by so many collateral duties that they cannot effectively succeed at all of them. Participants pointed out that mission-related tasks must, and will, take priority for leadership, despite the importance of sexual assault prevention trainings and activities.

“So, it really goes back to... cost versus benefit... are you willing to take a day away from maintaining aircraft to go out there and do something like [sexual assault prevention and response work]? And most of the time, the commander is going to say, ‘No,’ because sexual assault sucks, but so does not having any up planes.” — Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Male

Participants noted the importance of leaders being present and engaged with their units and being trained to lead and respond accordingly when incidents occur. Some participants noted that physical fitness scores and rifle tests represent key elements that can lead to promotion, but these scores do not necessarily indicate that a Service member is capable of leading a unit. Participants also stressed that good leaders are effective communicators and foster trust within their units.

“And we preach that all the time about being an intrusive leader. We have to be intrusive leaders in our organization in order to make this work with our junior guys. Because if you don't, you may have a hit and miss with what's going on with them.” — Navy, Senior Enlisted

“There's more that needs to be done in the scope of having more leaders understand better critical thinking skills when it comes down to the nuances of sexual assault. You have too many leaders that are...either they're too ignorant of the process, or too incompetent to want to know what the process is.” — Marine Corps, Mid-Enlisted, Male

Influencers of Younger Service Members

The hierarchical structure and unique working environments of the U.S. Military Services contribute to distinct factors that influence the behaviors and attitudes held by individual Service members. As younger Service members (defined here as those individuals aged 17 to 24 years old) make up nearly half of the military workforce, and this age group is at the highest risk for experiencing sexual assault (OPA, 2019b), it is particularly important to identify who influences attitudes and behavior among this demographic. Focus group participants were asked to discuss who influences younger Service members, and why these people are influential. Participants discussed how younger Service members are influenced by several “role models” who they may come into contact with, including different levels of non-commissioned officers (NCO), commissioned officers, peers, mentors, and sponsors. The most common factors that were discussed with regard to influential people included the impact of rank, frequency of contact with young Service members, and how close young Service members are with that individual.

Rank and Leadership

Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs)

When participants were asked about which ranks and leaders are most influential to younger Service members, many participants identified mid-level enlisted Service members and NCOs as particularly significant, especially among junior enlisted personnel. Many participants stated that in addition to the respect NCOs command from subordinates through the military's intrinsic rank structure, NCOs are particularly influential because they often exemplify what many junior enlisted members aspire to be: proficient in their occupation, knowledgeable of military culture, and effective in accomplishing the unit mission. Therefore, participants said that junior enlisted Service members respect and often emulate their NCO superiors.

"[NCO is] the rank where [younger Service members] feel close enough to them to be able to share personal experiences, but those people have enough experience to be their leader... Where they're at, they're in training, they're talking to drill instructors, and officers are just on a foreign planet."

— **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Female**

"As a group [the most influential would] be the lowest NCOs, like the seven levels would be setting the pace for the younger ones. Or the Senior Airmen even that are about to become NCOs." — **Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Male**

Participants said that this influence on junior Service members may not always be beneficial, however. Some participants discussed how NCOs that display toxic behaviors can potentially set the wrong example for their subordinates, effectively endorsing negative behaviors in their unit, such as a lack of accountability or discipline or modeling inappropriate language toward others. These discussions underscored the importance of NCO's understanding of unhealthy behaviors and how these behaviors increase the prevalence and risk of more severe behaviors across the continuum of harm.

"I think the senior NCOs too can have influence. Because if they do come into a workplace maybe you see your supervisor and your other Airmen kind of... Like maybe they're good, but you see a senior NCO that comes in and just starts shooting the [explicit] so to speak. Now they think that, 'Oh, it's okay for me to be like this because I saw all the way someone from up top doing this.'"

— **Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Female**

Although participants noted that NCOs in general have a great deal of sway over younger Service members, participants said that not all NCOs have the same level of influence. Specifically, participants discussed how older NCOs may have the power to dictate orders for the purpose of accomplishing a mission and to set the example for acceptable behavior; however, they have less influence over younger Service members' general behavior, speech, and actions behind closed doors. This gap of influence was attributed to the age gap between older NCOs and younger members, in which the greater difference in age means it may be generally harder for these two groups of people to relate to one another.

While participants said that older NCOs are less influential, other participants stated that mid-level enlisted and junior NCOs have more direct influence (both positive and negative) on younger Service members, because they are closer in rank and age than more senior NCOs.

“I think any good leadership teaches their guys to go to a Specialist before they go to their Team Leader, because he'll probably have the answer. It's just how it usually works, unless he's a [explicit], but usually he has the answer and you got to interact with him more because of the fact that he's not your Team Leader.”

— **Army, Junior Enlisted, Male**

The “E-4 Mafia”

Participants discussed the “E-4 Mafia” as a thin band of Service members uniquely positioned in the chain of command. The name itself refers to many Service members in the fourth enlisted pay grade (E-4) who are responsible for translating orders into practice at the lowest level. Participants sometimes characterized these members as having significant pull with younger Service members because they are of a relatable age and have experienced enough to have military work and life knowledge, but junior enough to not have significant codified leadership responsibilities as other more senior NCOs. Other participants said that this influence with junior enlisted members is driven by their close and frequent contact when carrying out workplace responsibilities.

The “E-4 Mafia”: The First Line of Behavioral Influence

The term “mafia” was used by participants to distinguish the discreet influence E-4 enlisted Service members wield over their younger peers. Of note, this term is not used to denote criminal or nefarious behavior; rather, the E-4 “mafia” and mid-level enlisted Service members overall are well-positioned to be a first line in inducing positive behavior and supporting a healthy workplace culture.

“The first person you're going to look up to is going to be that E-4, like E-4 mafia. And it's usually somebody that's two or three years older than you, and they just like to party. It's literally what it is for most people that are like, ‘this guy likes to have fun. He seems like I can hang out with him and have a good time.’” — **Army, Mid-Enlisted, Male**

“Like as a force, [the E4 Mafia is] very forceful. They set the culture, they set the standards. I will even, like for high school analogy, they're the juniors, right? They've done all the work, now they're [on their way to] colleges and they can rest easy because they know what is going on. Like they know how the organization works, but they're the first people that those Airmen are going to see.” — **Air Force, Junior Officer, Male**

Supervisors

Many participants identified direct supervisors as major influencers for younger members. Similar to NCOs, participants said that this influence is driven by the close working relationship

between the supervisor and younger Service members in addition to the supervisor's technical competence.

"Some part still comes from their supervision because they might have had a past that may not be that conducive but if... they emulate the people that they view as role models as like, 'Cool. I see that he does or does not do that. Then I also am okay to not do that.' It may be a little of a learning curve...but hopefully they're able to change based on what they see as acceptable in the workplace."

— **Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Male**

Although officers are important when it comes to setting work priorities and directing their units to accomplish the directives set forth by their superiors, many participants stated that officers are generally not particularly influential with junior enlisted Service members. Participants credited this lack of influence to the overall divide between enlisted personnel and officers, the professional distance between junior enlisted and officers of all ranks, as well as the typical age difference between junior enlisted Service members and their older superior officers.

"I almost want to say leadership [is less influential] because they are so high up there or you don't even know who they are, other than their name and their rank, or their face... especially for new Airmen. All they know is just to be scared and do what they say pretty much, right? I would say they have the least impact on a daily basis." — **Air Force, Junior Officer, Male**

Mentors

Some participants noted the mentors available to them through their Service's mentorship program as influential people. Participants described their mentors as generally a few pay grades above them and helpful in providing guidance and support when needed. However, some participants noted that the quality of the mentorship program depends on the command that runs it, and some participants had been assigned to units that did not prioritize their mentorship program.

Participants stated that mentors are often respected by their mentee, and thereby, influence the junior Service member's behaviors and thoughts. Although some participants noted that mentorship programs appear largely career focused, the programs may be used as a channel to influence beyond work-related behavior.

"The structure in the Marine Corps is we push leadership all the way down, so even lance corporals are leaders, but it's really the NCO corps. And I think a lot of times they're still learning how to be leaders themselves. There's a lot of that dynamic. And for mentoring NCO's, when we do observe their interactions like, 'Hey, did you think about this?' Or getting them to ask the right questions about themselves, so teaching them that leadership as they're leading the new guys."

— **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Female**

"If you don't have that role model in your life or in your career, then you kind of go through everyday life, trying to manage with the Army expectations, your jobs,

duties and whatnot. Someone could have gone through the same situations and that person could give you some guidance.” — Army, Junior Officer, Female

Similar to those participants who noted that some mentorship programs are better than others, some participants discussed how the forum for finding and connecting with mentors could be improved. Participants said that because some mentorship relationships are mandatory, the relationship with mentors can feel disingenuous or forced, defeating the purpose of what should be a genuine connection. Participants said this is especially true when mentors appear uncomfortable or unable to effectively guide a junior Service member.

Peers and Coworkers

In addition to the official chain of command structure, participants identified a younger Service member’s peers as particularly influential. Participants noted that peers know each other in a number of ways, such as being roommates or coworkers.

“Ideally it’s their immediate supervisor [that is most influential] but I think the truth will be their peers. [Younger Service members] get brought to the dorm and they kind of go to their little herd, assuming they’re single.”
— Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Male

In some instances, participants discussed that the most influential person is the individual in the workplace who is most technically proficient at his or her job. Similar to how individuals of higher rank serve as role models for behavior, participants said that individuals who are technically skilled are similarly respected by younger Service members who aspire to become as effective at their job.

“At tech school ... [younger Service members] would hover around the people with most experience or knowledge. I’ve had NCOs that were older, more experienced in the Air Force but were not specialized. They weren’t paramedics. And there was a senior paramedic that can tell you everything about anatomy and physiology and the Airmen would go to that person versus the NCO. And it’s almost the same thing. They go around the person that knows their job best.”
— Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Male

Background Prior to Service

Although much of the conversation surrounding influence on younger Service members directly addressed military workplace factors and people, some participants raised the point that an individual’s baseline behaviors are sometimes established by how they were raised as children. This rationale was often raised during discussions about unhealthy or unwanted behaviors, such as lessons learned in childhood, including “keeping one’s hands to one’s self.” Some participants said that although there are many influences in the military that could help shape an individual’s behavior, they believed that some bad attitudes or behaviors that are learned in childhood cannot be corrected. Participants emphasized this as doubly true because of young Service members’ ages and lack of life experiences. Some participants said that because many

younger Service members enlisted soon after graduating high school, there are juvenile norms and mind-sets that take time for Service members to overcome.

“It's the upbringing. That's what it is. It's how you're brought up, what you're used to doing. It's still in them, and no matter how many trainings that we've gone through or what discussions are had, they still feel, or certain people still feel, that if someone is wearing this type of clothing or they're behaving this type of way, they should feel free to accept an objectification that I'm going to do to you.” — **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Similar to the discussions on childhood lessons that influence adult behavior, some Service member participants stated that because the military brings individuals together from all walks of life and from across the country, some degree of conflict between individuals of different cultures is inevitable. Participants noted that some behaviors that are considered normal or acceptable in one culture may not be acceptable in another, and that because the military brings together Americans of different backgrounds, this can lead to some conflict.

“We also have a melting pot of backgrounds. We have people who are prior child sex assault victims. We have people who come from really [explicit] home lives and joining the military to get away from their families, so they've not exactly had the best upbringing. Some people who come from cultures, within their own dynamics from a city or a neighborhood, that has a very biased viewpoint against others. We see it all and, unfortunately, our biggest problem is how do we combat that, how do we nip it in the bud.”
— **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Influencers of Service Members at their First Duty Station

Participants who were experienced with the sponsor programs described the process of being assigned a sponsor when undergoing a Permanent Change of Station (PCS) to a new duty station. A sponsor is “similar in rank and family status” for the purpose of “offering something no briefing memo can—a friendly face and a wealth of personal experience” (Military OneSource, 2019). Of the participants with experience being assigned sponsors when arriving at a new installation, many stated that the contact with their sponsor set their expectations for workplace culture at their new duty station.

“[Sponsors] are the first person who gives you the feel of the command. First of all, if they reach out to you and talk to you that's really great. It's like, ‘Great, these people are tracking I'm coming. This is awesome.’ And then if they have a good experience, and they let you know they're having a good experience, and they answer all your questions, you feel good about everything. And then vice versa, if they don't know anything, they don't reach out to you, you have no idea what's going on. It's the feeling of stress and you perceive a negative command for even there.” — **Navy, Junior Officer, Female**

For example, some participants noted that if their sponsor took their sponsorship responsibilities seriously, their first impression of the command was positive. However, if their sponsor put in minimal or no effort into onboarding the newly arrived Service member, then the participant's first impression of the command was negative. Participants said that this first impression is important in establishing the newly arrived Service member's expectations for their command for the duration of their assignment.

"When I came here from my last base, my sponsor was a very busy person. Didn't give me clear instructions on where I needed to go for my squadron. And then once I finally got to work, I kind of got passed off to another errand to be sponsored and in process, and it was very different because the last squadron was very small. So, it felt more welcoming and more family-like. But this squadron, I kind of had to create my own family out of people here and there."

— **Air Force, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Some of the participants who were exposed to the sponsor program expressed gratitude for the helpfulness of their sponsor, although others said that the poor quality of their sponsor established a poor first impression of the duty station. Many participants who were familiar with the sponsor program said that there is significant room for improvement.

"I know when I got here, I had an amazing sponsor... She was like, 'All right, be outside in 10.' I walked out, she was parked right there, she took me on a drive around the base, showed me where my shop was, brought me to the headquarters, and then she brought me out for dinner and then we went back to the hotel and we hung out for a little bit. That was amazing." — **Navy, Junior Enlisted, Female**

"Now, I was a sponsor for two people coming in and then when they got here, they're like, 'You're no longer the sponsor, he's going to be the sponsor.' Two days later, they came up to me and they're like, 'We would've rather had you because he's annoying as [explicit], we don't want to be around him.' And I was like, 'I can't really do anything. That came from higher than me.' One of them is like, 'I'm putting in for an emergency transfer because of the way he's treating me,' because he was one of them that had the sexual harassment issues and I'm like, 'Sorry, I wish I could do something, but nobody's listening.' So, sponsorship has just gone downhill over here." — **Navy, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Gender Discrimination in the Workplace

Focus group participants had a mix of feedback regarding gender discrimination in their unit and their Service. Although some noted that they had not witnessed discrimination in their unit, most female participants shared examples from their career and their peers' careers in which they felt they were treated differently, for better or worse, based on their gender. Focus group participants noted their leadership has exhibited mixed success in mediating relationships between genders in their units. Some participants noted that their leadership exhibits favoritism toward one gender or the other, whereas others noted that their leadership seems intimidated to address issues obvious to others in the unit (e.g., uniform violations).

“We're drilling down SHARP so much to our leaders or just to our Soldiers in general that now they're becoming a little scared to say anything at all. And I haven't seen it in the medical side, it's more on the FORSCOM side, which makes sense because they don't have a lot of female officers or leaders in general. So, when they do have them, they side-step and they don't know how to react or deal with us.” — Army, Junior Officer, Female

Recognizing Gender Discrimination

Male focus group participants agreed that gender discrimination is wrong; however, they noted they have not seen or experienced it at their installation or in their unit. Several participants pointed out that female commanders are evidence that there is no gender discrimination at their installation. Female participants noted that their male peers may simply not understand how to recognize gender discrimination or sexual harassment, leading them to falsely assume that these behaviors do not exist.

“Obviously, there's exceptions to the norm. I mean, every department I've worked at, we've had at least one female firefighter. Have they ever been sexually assaulted or harassed? Probably not.” — Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Male

“My LPO [i.e., Lead Petty Officer] is a female. [Explicit] I mean, she's qualified, period. And I won't have anybody else as an LPO but her because she knows what she's doing. Day in day out. Comes in, takes care of business. And if it was anybody else that's a male that may be not as [inaudible], no, she knows what she's doing. So, I don't see discrimination as much here. I mean before here, before the Navy, I did the civilian sector. I saw a lot of discrimination. [Women] definitely are discriminated in the civilian sector. But in the military, it's what's on paper and what you can do.” — Navy, Junior Enlisted, Male

“As women, we recognize that from a really young age that something's not exactly right or something doesn't sit right with us because it's typically directed towards us, but men don't recognize it. Or they do recognize and don't have problems, or they don't want to be heard by certain people.”
— Air Force, Junior Officer, Female

Focus group participants shared that many male Service members will self-police their language and behavior when female Service members are around. Female participants noted that, without a permanent female presence, their male peers quickly revert to inappropriate language or “locker room talk.” Participants shared this experience as an example of how female Service members can feel ostracized in their male dominated groups or units.

“It's like all the guys, I'm not going to say what ranking but they're all in there joking around. I just pop up and run into a joke and they're like, ‘Oh [explicit], my bad.’ I was like, ‘Oh, no. Finish the joke. I want to hear this.’ ... obviously you all know it's wrong when a female [Service member] walks into the room.”
— Navy, Mid-Enlisted, Female

Perceptions of Occupational Differences

Much like male-dominated professions in the civilian sector (Parker 2018; Rabe-Hemp 2008; Brescoll, Dawson & Uhlmann, 2010), some occupations or career paths in the military have a reputation for being more toxic for female Service members. Participants shared that, in some occupations, toxic behaviors, ranging from micromanaging to sexual harassment are tolerated and female Service members are made to feel unwelcome. Participants also pointed out the detrimental effect that these toxic behaviors can have on female promotion and retention in the military.

The Ratio of Women in the Military

Participants pointed out that women are the minority in the military, which contributes to their voices not being heard. Participants shared experiences in which, in the interest of being professional or because they fear their male colleagues will not support them, their female peers will not speak up or raise attention to concerns of unfair treatment or discrimination. Some focus group participants attributed this to the lack of female leadership presence in the military. Female participants noted that younger female Service members may feel more comfortable taking their concerns to a senior female leader and are less likely to raise their concerns to a senior male leader.

“We're going to have [only] one female chief at our entire command and that has created a negativity in the workplace. Because the junior female Sailors are coming up, ‘Why aren't there any [female leaders] here?’ What message is that portraying to them? And they are concerned, ‘Who do I address once you're gone?’ ‘What female presence, leadership wise, who do I go to when you're gone?’” — Navy, Senior Enlisted

Some participants indicated that the low number of women in leadership roles impacted their workplace, especially female participants. Some female participants noted that it made it especially hard for more junior female Service members who may be looking for female role models within their command.

“People look to find people like themselves. I think a lot of women naturally look for female leaders... As for the leadership, yeah there's plenty of admirals or generals out there I'm sure. But I personally look for the female leaders.” — Navy, Junior Officer, Female

Unhealthy Behaviors Are Accepted in Some Occupations

Participants noted that in some military occupations, they have experienced or witnessed discrimination against female Service members. Focus group participants emphasized that this discrimination is not Service-wide, rather it is occupation specific. Participants noted that some of the more male-dominated or “working” fields tend to be more toxic for female Service members.

“I felt like I was discriminated more at [my previous role] than I have been in in the wing. I was told I should not be in the Marine Corps. I was called names. All this stuff happened at [my previous role]. Once I got to the aviation side, I feel like I was given a pretty equal opportunity. I think that's because of what pipeline I went. I've heard stories about other pipelines and it's not something that I would have wanted.” — **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Female**

“If we're talking about culture, it is awful in the specific culture that I'm in within maintenance. I've had a lot of scenarios. My supervisor texting me completely inappropriate things about how good I looked in my blues, and I show my flight chief and my flight commander, and they move me [inaudible] and nothing happens to him.” — **Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Female**

Women Can Be Relegated to Certain Jobs

Focus group participants said that women can be relegated to particular jobs, “non-working” desk duties, or additional collateral duties based on gender and regardless of training or qualifications. Participants noted this is detrimental to good morale and team building but can also be detrimental to retention in the military for female Service members. When a Service member does not receive training or is not given the opportunity to excel at their job, it can inhibit their promotion potential. Service members who feel limited or excluded from being promoted may be more likely to leave the military when their tour is up.

“A lot of times in maintenance, the ladies are shoved in places where they're not actually maintenance... Some of the friends that I talk to, it makes them feel like [they're] not part of the team. I mean, to me, that would be a toxic work environment because it would deplete their self-respect or whatever and their own level of respect for the job.” — **Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Male**

“Things like that [e.g., being relegated to desk work, not performing job Service members were trained for] will also stop somebody from promoting, which then defeats somebody and says, ‘Well, if I'm not going to get promoted, why should I stay?’ That cyclically like we were talking causes women probably to leave the military disproportionately faster, sooner than men, which changes the numbers too.” — **Navy, Junior Officer, Female**

Female focus group participants pointed out that when they have been relegated to an office job, it has kept them from being trained in their actual occupation. When they are transferred to new locations, they have to explain that they are not necessarily qualified because they have not received training or had the opportunity to practice their trade.

“When my evals and my brag sheet come up, it's like I got all these collaterals and I got all these qualifications and things, but I don't know my job. Basically, I have no rate training. So, that already cuts me out from a lot of things when it

comes to different MET [i.e., mission essential task] packages and all that other stuff because I haven't been in my job doing my job."

— **Navy, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Male Participants' Perceptions of Gender

In addition to the themes described above, unique key themes emerged from male focus groups regarding female Service members' experiences in the military, including the lack of uniformity of physical fitness standards by gender, the lack of consideration for the morale issues that come with integrating women into military units, and their experiences in which they believed female Service members manipulated a leader or policy for their benefit based on their gender alone. Of note, although most of the themes in this section are representative of male participant groups, a small number of female participants echoed these themes, as well.

Physical Fitness Standards

Male participants said that different physical fitness standards by gender create a negative work environment. They noted that the practical concern of having lower standards for women may put them and their peers in life-threatening situations, noting that more elite jobs (e.g., rescue swimmers, SEAL training) have the same physical standards for women as they do for men. They suggested physical fitness standards be based on the job a Service member is doing, taking into account the different physical requirements of, for example, an auto mechanic versus an infantryman.

"To be a rescue swimmer there's no different numbers; you either match the minimums or you're not a rescue swimmer... And they have women in that program, too." — **Navy, Mid-Enlisted, Male**

"To me, I'm a mechanic. What is required of me to do my job? If you're infantry, what is required to be an infantryman? What do you have to be able to do to be successful, and not die on the [explicit] job or something because you did something stupid? It's not, 'Oh cool, you're a female, you can't do it.' It's 'Hey, can you reach these criteria?' Now there's the argument of, 'Oh well, these guys do this, but we should only have to do this, or they should only have to do that. There's criteria here that you have to meet. If you don't meet it, in some cases, it'll get somebody killed or hurt, whatever the case is."

— **Marine Corps, Mid-Enlisted, Male**

Male participants also pointed out that having different physical fitness standards is unfair to female Service members, leading to discrimination by their peers. Participants noted that many male Service members struggle with achieving high physical fitness scores, just as many women excel beyond the male fitness standards. Some participants proposed that having equal physical fitness standards will lead to team building and will further encourage peers to work together to achieve higher standards together.

"When you have people all do the same thing and get the same experience I mean besides POs [i.e., petty officers] and stuff like that it encourages them to work

together if we're all doing the same thing together. We're all doing the same standards. We all have to push ourselves to that same standard. If you're pushing each other to different standards and different lengths you're going to have some people up here and some people down here and if we're all pushing at the same time the same standard it's going to encourage people to work better together.” — Army, Junior Enlisted, Male

“[Gender-based fitness standards] creates a wall. A lot of men tend to look at [female Service members] like they got it easy. Then you do have a lot of women who put forth themselves and trying to always prove themselves every day because they know it, they know every day they got to meet the bar. Then you have some that do it, that will do a male 300 PFT [i.e., physical fitness test] just to say, ‘Yes we can.’” — Marine Corps, Mid-Enlisted, Male

Gender Integration in the Military

Focus group participants acknowledged that the knee-jerk reaction to issues between genders in a unit is often to segregate female and male Service members from one another. They noted how problematic this can be to morale, despite the intention to protect female Service members from harassment and to protect male Service members from false allegations. Male focus group participants also noted that integrating female Service members into all-male units changes the group dynamic; participants further proposed that this integration can threaten group cohesion, and new female Service members may be inadvertently ostracized. Participants proposed that treating female Service members as disruptive or a distraction due to their physical characteristics or abilities, or by assuming that sexual harassment is contingent on a female being present, opens the door to condoning behaviors leading to sexual harassment and, possibly, sexual assault.

“We learn about the continuum of sexual harassment that starts with just assuming that a woman is a distraction in the workplace versus, actually, she's a really good worker and she does her job a lot better than you, maybe, and she's contributing a lot to the team...” — Navy, Junior Officer, Female

*“I've had one female come to our department, and she wanted to be one of the guys. She tried really hard. And it's one of those things, not that we're excluding you, but things happen. Things have changed, and we can't do certain things around you because we're not allowed, and rightfully so.”
— Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Male*

Systems-Level Inequity Allows for Manipulation

Male focus group participants said they perceive that many female Service members manipulate leadership to get out of work and tend to be promoted faster than their male peers. Other male focus group participants noted the belief that although some female Service members work hard, they are promoted faster than their male peers solely due to their gender. Of note, female focus group participants shared the concern that others perceive they and their female peers are only promoted due to gender. Regardless of the truth, the perception that female Service members are

promoted due to gender rather than skill damages the sense of achievement for women who are promoted and undermines confidence in leadership's decision-making.

"...It calls into question their ability as a leader to make critical decisions because, are you really making that decision based upon that person's performance, or because they fit some sort of mental stereotype that they have to pick? Whether it's a traditional stereotype, this is the person in this position, or, 'Well, I have to do this other decision because I have to show that I'm breaking historical trends.'" — **Air Force, Junior Officer, Male**

"I think that's difficult [referring to discerning why someone is promoted] right now for men and women to differentiate between because women are working hard and earning what they deserve and they're getting what they are working towards, and men are looking at it like, 'Well maybe you're a hard worker but this man really deserved it and you got it because you're a woman.'"
— **Air Force, Junior Officer, Female**

Some participants noted that when female Service members take advantage of being given easier work, it leads to a self-fulfilling stereotype that other women who join the unit or Service will face as well. Participants also pointed out that this behavior does a disservice to other female Service members who are inadvertently grouped with the small number of women taking advantage of easier jobs.

"It's [female Service members] that you put out on a project, they don't want to do their job or they make like they're so helpless that they can't do it, and they just watch everybody else do it, and then they wonder why they get stuck at an office job or where they can't take these certain classes. You're not pulling your own weight. If you don't want to be treated like a female and get that office job, when you go out to the project, just pull your own weight."
— **Navy, Junior Enlisted, Female**

"I used to be in civil engineering back in the day and we had some [female Service members] that were treated differently by the leaders. And I was an Airman at the time so I had no say, really, but she didn't have to go out on certain jobs and she didn't have to do some of the manual labor that we had to do. Which was weird, because when I would see her out there she could work just as good as the guys." — **Air Force, Senior Enlisted**

Female Participants' Perceptions of Gender

Female focus group participants shared their experiences and perceptions of unequal treatment during their time in the Service. In addition to key themes described below, female participants also shared that their male leaders often rely on them to educate others on appropriate workplace behavior and to "mother" other female Service members. They described the conundrum they face in reconciling what is expected of them as a Service member and what is expected of them as a woman. Of note, although most of the themes in this section are representative of female participant groups, a small number of male participants echoed these themes, as well.

“I feel like with being a mother, I played the mother role a lot. Especially to the junior enlisted I’m sure it also has to do that I was prior enlisted, but they seek me out for the mothering advice. I don’t feel like that happens as much to the [male Service members].” — Navy, Junior Officer, Female

Female Service Members Must Prove Themselves More

Female focus group participants shared experiences in which either they felt unfairly judged or in which they observed their female peers being unfairly judged based on gender despite demonstrating their professionalism or skill at their job. Participants recounted instances of being passed over for promotions that they felt they had earned or being judged for having strong personalities. Several participants pointed out that tough male leaders, for example, receive recognition, whereas tough female leaders are judged or considered to be offensive or abrasive.

“The women in the course did exceptionally well in everything but leadership. ... Not a single woman in my course had above a 90... I brought it to my command and said, ‘Why do I have an 87 leadership grade? In the last nine months, you’ve never given me one piece of negative feedback. Ranked third in the class.’ After two days, I came back every day to the lead person and said, ‘Can you please explain why you chose this leadership grade for me?’ And nobody could.”
— Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Female

“If you’re getting promoted you know you’re in this boys’ club and so to keep it boys club, obviously you have to have boys or boys that fit into that culture that they’re trying to preserve. So, they discriminate. I’m sure that they still do discriminate and just like, ‘She’s just as qualified, but she’s a woman.’”
— Air Force, Junior Enlisted, Female

Female participants shared experiences in which they have had to advocate for fair treatment or assignments that are on par with those assigned to their male peers. Participants pointed out that if they had not been so outspoken, they would have been relegated to desk jobs and might have missed out on experiences leading to promotion opportunities.

“I’ve had to beg to get sent on ops to go anywhere. Begged to be put on deployments because the [male Service members] will always get put on first. All the time. I’ve had to go to my ops person and tell them, ‘Hey what operations do you have going on? Put me on. I want to go. I’m fully qualified. I’m your most qualified person. Put me on.’ And they’re like, ‘Yeah but we’re going to send this person instead because you know they can run better.’ And I’m like, but I know more.” — Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female

Female Service Members Are Pressured to Conform to Male Culture

Participants emphasized the importance of fitting in for female Service members to be successful in their units. They noted that female Service members who speak out against inappropriate

language may be ostracized or ousted from an otherwise cohesive group, ultimately damaging group morale.

“And again, it sounds silly, but if you fit in, you're going to make it. If you don't fit in, you're not. I'm not saying that's right because I don't think it is, but it's an unfortunate thing that's going on in a lot of our communities. It's that if they feel like you don't belong there, they will find a way to remove you.”

— **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Female**

“I wasn't necessarily the one being ostracized in that sense but it's like they no longer felt comfortable with her because they had this conception, ‘Well if she doesn't want to hear stuff she's going to report us for sexual harassment.’ Are you sexually harassing her? If not, then no she won't do that. It's kind if this misconception against trust type thing that seems to settle in.”

— **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Female**

Focus group participants pointed out that female Service members who dress more feminine or display their emotions face higher scrutiny and judgment from their peers. Participants emphasized that female Service members are expected to blend in with their male peers in attitude and appearance. Even so, female focus group participants pointed out that if they act too much like their male peers, they are judged for having an attitude or may be branded as difficult to work with. They reiterated the fine line they walk each day to do their job well and strive to be part of the group.

“It's that weird link of saying it's not professional to wear makeup or it's not professional if your nails are done, but the code word there is that it's not professional to be a woman or to be feminine.”

— **Navy, Junior Officer, Female**

“(Moderator: What are women supposed to act like in the Air Force?) Like the men.” — **Air Force, Junior Enlisted, Male**

“... even almost in the Air Force, if you get a strong dominant male personality that's mission focused, ‘He's a go getter! He's going to go get the job, that I can trust him’, but if it's a female [Service Member] ‘Oh, here she is, she's a, she's that word,’ and even sometimes you feel the race involved with some of that too, and you get some of that thrown in too.” — **Air Force, Junior Officer, Male**

Physical Limitations for Female Service Members

Female participants noted there are physical limitations to their equipment and working spaces, particularly on ships, which limit the number of women who are able to serve in a particular role (e.g., limited berths on ships for women, equipment designed for men). Female Service members often must know to proactively ask for support, particularly when traveling, because their male peers and supervisors do not understand the gender-specific limitations they face in their occupation or role. Female Service members cited either doing their own troubleshooting or reaching out to female peers in similar roles to learn more about how they managed. They

pointed out that this can make it even more difficult for female Service members who are new to the role or the Service because they may find themselves in risky situations without any preparation for it.

“I think it's just a lack of awareness, the fact that as a female when you're traveling, I have to think of 10 different other things to stay safe... I can't fly through Saudi in the middle of the night by myself. They're not getting that or, oh, last time I was there, I flew in the middle of the night and the reason why you are going to give me a car and I'm not taking a taxi anywhere is because I can't get a taxi in this country by myself. It's that constant reminder that we are exposed much differently.” — **Navy, Junior Officer, Female**

Focus group members pointed out the stigma that female Service members face when announcing a pregnancy. When the topic of pregnancy came up in focus group discussions, both male and female participants shared their experiences, their perceptions, or their knowledge of their peers' perception, that female Service members plan and use a pregnancy to avoid deployment. Despite pointing to this commonly held belief, some participants pointed out that although some women may plan a pregnancy to avoid deployment, most are simply planning their family as would a woman employed in any other field. Participants also noted that in some occupations, pregnant Service members and breast-feeding mothers are moved out of their field during the pregnancy or breast-feeding due to safety concerns, but this often feels like punishment or ostracism that male Service members do not face when they are expecting a child.

“It almost feels like you did something wrong, because you get taken out of your work center, away from the people that you work with, away from the position that you busted your [explicit] to get, put on this admin job that people expected you to get put on anyway because you're a female.”
— **Marine Corps, Mid-Enlisted, Female**

“When a guy has a baby right before deployment, no one bats an eye. There's no, ‘Oh my God, he's leaving his wife for six months.’”
— **Navy, Mid-Enlisted, Female**

Some male focus group participants posited that female Service members use pregnancy to avoid deployment. They said they feel this is unfair, particularly when those Service members receive the same awards or recognition as their male peers who deployed.

“And the thing about being a Marine in the early 2000s and your unit is about to deploy and then a female [Service member] gets pregnant right before. After, bragging about how she was going to get pregnant. You get deployed with your unit, right? And then you might go in a combat zone and your friends are dying. You have your brothers [explicit] dying next to you and you come back and there's a Marine who's about to get out who didn't do anything for six months bragging how she got out of deployment because she got pregnant.”
— **Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Male**

Workplace Factors Indicative of a Positive or Negative Workplace Culture

Service members who participated in the focus groups discussed elements and behaviors they associate with a healthy and an unhealthy working environment in the military, particularly thinking about the interactions they have had with the individuals they work with. To stimulate discussion, participants were asked to write down key words they would use to describe a positive or negative workplace on sticky notes. They were asked to discuss as a group how these positive and negative factors impact the well-being of a military workplace. Key factors that emerged throughout the groups included communication, respect, work attitudes, camaraderie, and teamwork. Key words recorded on sticky notes by participants were coded, tallied and are presented by category (e.g., hostility, lack of respect, etc.), and by pay grade and gender in the figures below. Figure 4 displays the *negative* workplace factors that were most frequently mentioned in the focus group sessions and Figure 5 displays the *healthy* workplace factors most frequently mentioned in the focus group sessions.

Figure 4.
Negative Workplace Factors

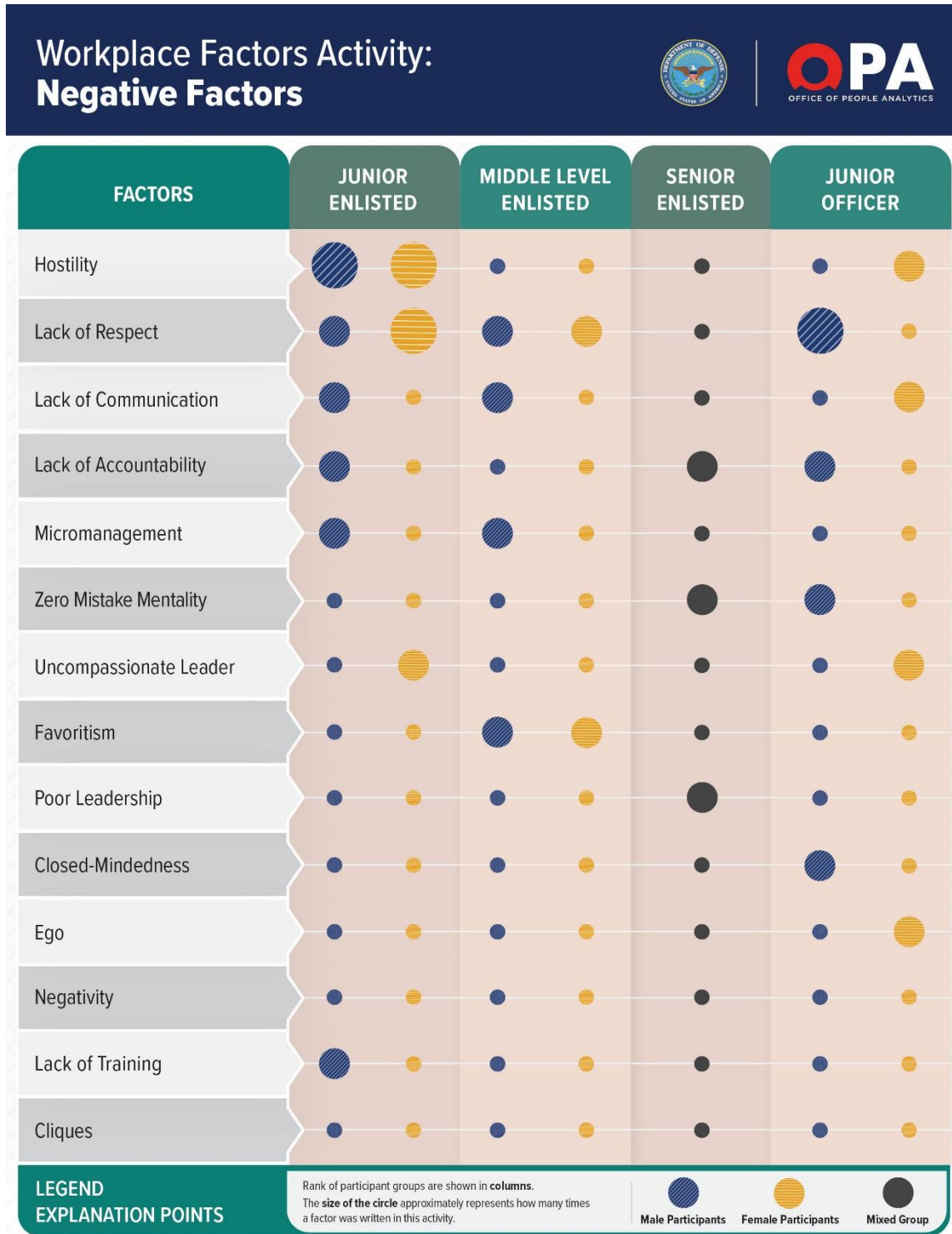
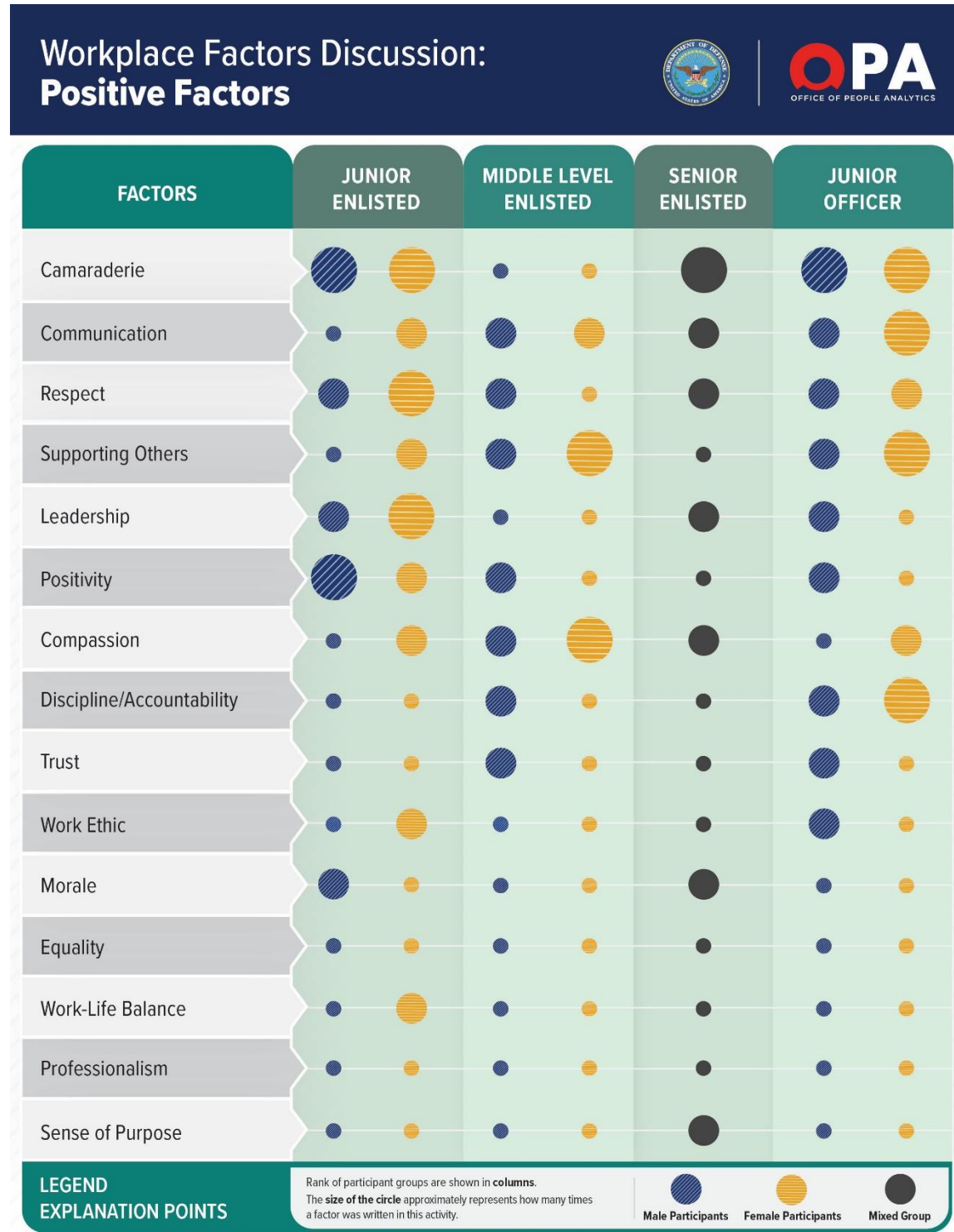


Figure 5.
Positive Workplace Factors



Key Factors Impacting Workplace Culture

As indicated in focus group discussion and through the sticky note activity, participants identified numerous factors contributing to workplace culture. Of note, some factors appeared to exist on a spectrum. For example, as noted below, although effective communication can be a key factor contributing to a healthy workplace culture, poor communication can be highly detrimental to a healthy workplace. Participants also pointed out that some aspects of workplace culture can become toxic. They pointed out that these environments create undue levels of stress and can create physically unsafe situations for personnel.

Communication

Both male and female participants from all ranks stressed the importance of good and open communication in the workplace between leadership and Service members, and between peers. Participants explained that effective communication creates a sense of trust, engagement, transparency, and approachability within a unit, leading to a more productive work environment. Participants expressed that good communication is about connecting with individuals and being able to listen to their peers, supervisors or subordinates. On the other hand, poor communication creates a negative working environment that causes confusion among individuals and a lack of teamwork.

“Communication. I've seen a shift in transparency to a certain extent. You don't need every Sailor to know the inner workings of your decision-making at any level of leadership, but a certain level of transparency provides a little more buy-in. The really effective leaders I've seen have gotten buy in from their Sailors by providing, at some point, a level of transparency that brings them into what's going on and gives them at least some understanding of why.”

— **Navy, Junior Officer, Male**

“So, you have to have that connection, that relationship with somebody so that they trust you to be able to have that good and open communication and let you know that it goes both ways. Also letting them know that you're human too. That's always a part of that good and open communication. But in every unit, communication is always one of the biggest things that gets hit on the climate assessment. It's like communication isn't happening and so some people will even overcommunicate but there's definitely a lot of under communication that occurs.” — **Air Force, Junior Officer, Female**

Trust

Along with communication, many participants also discussed the significance of trust: trust among peers, trust in leadership, and leadership's trust in their unit. Participants reported feeling that it is vital to create a sense of trust within a unit and that trust goes both ways. Trust can impact morale and camaraderie in a workplace. Micromanaging from leaders is perceived as a lack of trust in their Service members. Participants in the focus groups noted that a micromanaged environment becomes a toxic environment that prevents individual growth.

“That kind of goes along with the trust and morale. The more you trust your unit, the more morale you have in your unit, the tighter that family bond becomes, and you got to build that brotherhood that we always talk about. And it just makes the workplace a little bit more enjoyable because you kind of are with your family at that point.” — Marine Corps, Senior Enlisted

“So, just micromanaging is the absolutely worst. And some people need it. Some people do need you to be more hands on. But for a majority of people it's toxic, and it just completely smashes morale, and it doesn't allow people to flourish, or to be empowered.” — Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Female

Respect

Many participants, specifically male Service members, stressed the importance of respect toward people in their chain of command. Additionally, participants reported feeling that one should always have respect for their leadership. Participants noted even if they disagree with those higher up the chain of command, respect toward them still needs to occur. A lack of respect could lead to confrontation in the workplace.

“I put respect and discipline, both about the same thing. If younger enlisted individuals, or even NCOs, don't respect their higher leadership or each other, then it's not going to work. They're not going to listen to what we have to say or anything I would say, what anyone has to say.”
— Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Male

Workplace Attitude

Participants, particularly male Service members, indicated that one's attitude at work can create a positive or negative working environment for everyone. For example, participants expressed that positive attitudes at work boost morale and when someone has a negative attitude, it can bring down the whole work environment. Negative attitude not only affects the individual, but it impacts everyone around them.

“That's instant toxicity when you walk into anywhere and you just have negative attitude or a negative outlook. You just start bringing people down with you, and it doesn't matter how much positivity you have. Just one person being negative can destroy everything.” — Marine Corps, Senior Enlisted

“When I first showed up on shift, there's quite a few people who had extremely negative attitudes and that sort of affected me too because I'd only been there a couple months and I was already hating the command. And I didn't know anybody. Everyone I worked with was talking [explicit] about it.”
— Navy, Mid-Enlisted, Male

Compassion

Participants, particularly female Service members, discussed the importance of compassion for others in the workplace. Participants talked about compassion from supervisors as well as from peers. Participants felt being kind, caring, and empathetic to one another is an important quality in the workplace. When leaders embody compassion towards their Service members it creates a sense of connectivity and loyalty.

“... one thing I will say coming from a huge family is that I believe that when you're in huge groups, you've got to run things with a little bit of compassion, a little bit of love, a little bit of empathy. And to me that, my emotions take over how I lead because they help me tap into my gut when I do feel like something's off with somebody. Or, 'Oh man, my superintendent is being over worked. Let me tell her to take a mental health day.' To me that is all emotion. It has nothing to do with process-oriented, mission focused. No, mission focus means that I'm telling my superintendent to get health day because otherwise she's going to break down on me at the job when I need her the most.”

— **Air Force, Junior Officer, Female**

“Just having someone that can empathize with your personal situation is big. That transactional leader or transformational leader, they have those qualities. They're reliable, they know how to talk to people, they can relate to anyone and they genuinely care.” — **Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Female**

Camaraderie and Teamwork

Along with being compassionate and empathetic, focus group participants also agreed that teamwork and supporting others is a key element that makes up a healthy workplace culture. Many female participants emphasized the importance of teamwork in the focus groups. Supporting and empowering others and working as a team boosts morale and creates a sense of camaraderie in a unit. Conversely, participants emphasized that lack of support from leadership makes it particularly difficult for them to do their job.

“We, as an Air Force, as a whole, Airmen across the board, are responsible to each other and we're there to support each other, and to help each other get through things, not just be the disciplinarian.”

— **Air Force, Junior Officer, Male**

“But for me, leadership is when you're supposed to be looking out for the Airmen and making it easier for them to transition and do their job. Because I know a lot of the work tends to fall, at least in my aircrew field, on the Airmen. And so even though they still have to manage all the Airmen, supporting them and helping them and guiding them, sometimes there's a lack of that. And that can be really hard to do your job.” — **Air Force, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Both male and female Service members who participated in the focus group sessions agreed that camaraderie is a key factor in the workplace. On the workplace culture activity, senior enlisted

Service members in particular noted camaraderie, more than any other factor, as being a key attribute in the workplace (see Figure 5). Camaraderie instills a sense of trust and teamwork in a unit. On the other hand, favoritism and cliques in a workplace creates a hostile work environment.

“Camaraderie is also part of that rigor, produces bonds between people, and so having those bonds within your workplace is good.”

— **Navy, Junior Officer, Male**

“It kind of goes hand in hand with favoritism. Also, with non-inclusion and gossip. Behind your back talk... You think that you're doing your job good and then you overhear that someone was talking about you because you were doing something bad. It's like 'If we're a team, why can't we all just talk about it together?'” — **Air Force, Junior Enlisted, Male**

Accountability

Many female participants identified accountability and enforcing discipline as crucial factors that create a positive work culture. Participants stated that holding Service members liable for their actions and enforcing punishment will lead to a more structured environment and higher quality individuals in the workplace. In contrast, participants communicated that leaders who tolerate negative behaviors, like disrespect, create harmful working environments.

“I think a lot of times people think that you know, trying to create a good command environment is just trying to make everybody happy and friendly. But if you don't have that sense of accountability to also complement that compassion, then it's going to fall apart pretty quick. And all of the places that I feel like I've been at commands that were successful, they have had a strong sense of accountability and integrity and honesty.” — **Navy, Junior Officer, Female**

Indicators of an Unhealthy Workplace

Focus group participants conveyed that a perfectionist environment where people are fearful of making mistakes can create a toxic workplace. One negative effect of a perfectionist work environment is the potential for hampered personal and professional growth for staff. Another negative effect of this mindset is that it inherently creates an incredibly stressful workplace for Service members. Participants suggested this may lead to alcohol misuse as Service members seek outlets for stress, eventually leading to risky behavior and situations.

“We live in a zero-defect mentality. Until that really changes, I don't know because you can't be vulnerable. You cannot mess up and so therefore, you don't have free flowing information because people are scared to say stuff because they don't want to be wrong, which creates more problems. Your leadership actually doesn't know what's going on.” — **Navy, Junior Officer, Female**

“One is a mindset of fear that, ‘Okay, I'm being watched,’ or, ‘I'm being observed, positively, negatively, continuously in that setting,’ which will then lead

to you trying to seek ways of relieving that stress and that fear outside of work, which can lead to overuse of alcohol or recreational drugs, or looking for sexual release, or other things to just change your mind set for those times.”

— **Air Force, Junior Office, Male**

Participants also recognized that a toxic working environment is one that threatens the physical and mental safety of personnel. Participants expressed that when leadership is unaware of, or unresponsive to, high levels of stress or inappropriate behaviors in the workplace it creates a toxic atmosphere for the entire unit. As noted in the section above, toxic environments can create high levels of stress which can impair Service members’ judgment and decision-making skills. Participants noted that toxic stress can manifest in substance misuse or sexual misconduct if unit stress is not managed by leadership. Participants further noted that leaders with poor leadership traits lead to and/or perpetuate a toxic atmosphere.

“A negative workplace to me is somewhere where they're going to stagnate. You're not going to grow as a person. But toxic is where people get hurt, physically, mentally.” — **Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Male**

“That stress is going to possibly turn into some bad behaviors to include drinking, making poor decisions, destructive decisions. Which may contribute to them going out either on-base, or out in the community to have a lapse in judgment in their actions in dealing with a woman or touching a man inappropriately, or something like that.” — **Navy, Senior Enlisted**

“Toxic leaders can actually have a lot of these qualities. They can be micromanaging, passive aggressive, don't listen to opinions, just horrible to work with mood swings in the workplace. It's not fun.” — **Air Force, Senior Enlisted**

Chapter 3: Characteristics of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

Participants shared their experiences with sexual harassment in the workplace. Their feedback uncovered gaps and misperceptions in identifying sexual harassment and behaviors that may lead to sexual harassment and, increased risk for sexual assault. SAPR/SHARP responder participants shared common characteristics of reported sexual assault cases, while all participants were asked to identify locations and location characteristics in which risky behaviors (e.g., gawking and staring, verbal harassment, alcohol use) occur.

Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

Participants were asked about how their unit and Service-level leaders handle sexual harassment and ways in which workplace conditions might be improved. Responses on preventing sexual harassment varied widely compared to participants' discussion on sexual assault. Although some participants said they felt that sexual harassment is not prevalent in their workplace, others said they feel this perception is due to sexual harassment prevention being less of a priority than prevention of sexual assault. Some participants noted that sexual assault prevention trainings are prevalent, but they do not see the tie between these trainings and combatting sexual harassment in the workplace. Still others reported that their leadership has not talked to them about sexual harassment or has not identified behaviors that are inappropriate or not to be tolerated. These perceptions may be further compounded by the fact that many participants said they feel that sexual harassment is poorly defined and leaves a lot of room for interpretation. Participants pointed out the recent cultural shifts in conversations about the subject and proposed that younger Service members may be more familiar than older Service members with what behavior and language is inappropriate.

General Perceptions of Sexual Harassment Prevalence in the Workplace

In the focus groups, perspectives on sexual harassment were much more varied than perspectives on sexual assault. Male participants indicated perceiving most instances of sexual harassment to include lower level incidents (e.g., staring, gawking) and that sexual harassment is only really a problem in rare, high-profile cases. Other male participants conceded that sexual harassment is a widespread issue, but it is simply more difficult to prevent and to investigate than clear cases of sexual assault. Despite these conflicting viewpoints, participants acknowledged that doing nothing to prevent sexual harassment will give way to a potential increase in sexual assaults. Indeed, many participants were aware of the association between sexual harassment and risk for sexual assault.

“I think people take sexual assault way more seriously... People have banter and they're like, ‘It's harmless, it's just talk.’ Sexual harassment culture leads to sexual assault, so when something bad actually happens, then it's actually taken seriously.” — Air Force, Junior Enlisted, Male

Defining Sexual Harassment

When asked to describe what sexual harassment looks like in the workplace, most participants were unable to define sexual harassment; rather, many participants noted that sexual harassment is highly subjective and subject to the perception of the victim as well as bystanders. This viewpoint was particularly prevalent among male participants who expressed that sexual harassment is mostly perception based. Several participants indicated that sexual harassment includes behaviors that range in severity, such as gawking, staring or inappropriate jokes, as well as more serious behaviors such as groping.

“My understanding of the sexual harassment definitions is that there's both a subjective and an objective component to it. So, if you're saying something and sort of this imaginary reasonable person would find it offensive, then that's part of it, but the other part of it is there has to be someone who actually is offended by it.” — **Army, Junior Officer, Male**

“I think one of the keys with sexual harassment is, someone said it in one of our briefings, if I compliment her and say, ‘You look nice in your uniform,’ but if somebody else compliments her, if she takes their tone of voice or their body language a certain kind of way, then for her it would look kind of like sexual harassment because it's not accepted.” — **Air Force, Junior Enlisted, Male**

Participants noted that part of this subjective component is that most witnessed sexual harassment incidents tend to be off hand comments, or lewd or indecent jokes. Participants shared experiences in which they have been the subject of lewd comments, for example, when they were in civilian clothes or if they bent down to pick something up. Others shared that they had experienced more blatant forms of sexual harassment, such as being repeatedly asked out after saying “no,” receiving unwanted shoulder massages, and groping.

“But I come in [in civilian] clothes in the morning and I've had people say, ‘Well [explicit], I didn't know you had all that.’” — **Navy, Mid Enlisted, Female**

“Today I bent over to get something. And I didn't know there was anybody behind me. Bent over to grab something really quick and a Sergeant is behind me and said, ‘Oh, don't tempt me.’” — **Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Some participants pointed out that in trainings and small group discussions, groups of men and women define sexual harassment differently from one another. Participants pointed out that men and women in trainings also have different perceptions of how common sexual harassment is, noting that female Service members are easily able to identify and share examples of sexual harassment.

“I feel like in general, [women] have to deal with sexual harassment more often. I've been sexually harassed in every job I've had thus far, and it's just a fact of life and I've had discussions with men who have said, ‘Oh, well it doesn't happen that

often, right?’ No, it has literally happened in every job I’ve had thus far. I think we’re just a lot more aware of it and we are able to identify it more quickly.”

— **Air Force, Junior Officer, Female**

Cultural Shifts in Identifying Sexual Harassment

When participants were asked how they define sexual harassment, many noted that the cultural changes occurring outside of the military shape the dialogue within the Services. Behaviors that may have once been admissible and a normal part of the “good old boys’ club” face greater scrutiny and are creating a cultural clash between younger and older generations. Some participants posited that due to the rise of the #MeToo era, some younger Service members have more knowledge and are better equipped to call out sexual harassment.

Male participants, particularly in higher ranks, noted that even the suggestion of sexual misconduct could ruin their career because they would be perceived as “guilty until proven innocent,” which has created a backlash in discussions surrounding sexual harassment. Male participants noted that they frequently feel targeted during sexual assault and sexual harassment briefings and trainings, despite not personally acting inappropriately.

‘It’s pretty much like the good old boys’ club. So, they created that norm of how everything was going to be. Like right now, with everybody addressing it and trying to change it, it’s a whole lot of kickback. We get a lot of kickback, a lot of ‘Why you making changes? It wasn’t like that before.’ You can’t just sexually harass somebody just because no one never addressed it.”

— **Navy, Senior Enlisted**

Factors Influencing Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

Given the complexity surrounding sexual harassment, participants were asked why they believe sexual harassment continues to be a problem. Participants continued to express that cultural clashes between generations of Service members are a major factor. Additionally, participants cited tolerance of inappropriate behavior from leadership, abuse of power, and a lack of consequences in cases as other prominent reasons why sexual harassment persists.

Cultural Clashes

Participants acknowledged that the military has historically been a male-dominated organization, which in turn has created a “good old boys’ club,” in which inappropriate language and behavior may not only have been tolerated but encouraged. Some participants noted sexual commentary that might have previously been considered appropriate in an all-male environment may currently be perceived as inappropriate when female Service members are present. Despite these cultural changes, the Services remain predominately male, which may be one reason these preexisting norms have been so slow to change.

‘I think it’s easier sometimes for us to be like, ‘Oh, well that Marine’s from the old Corps. He’s been around for a real long time or he just doesn’t understand, or he’s not used to this. But it’s the same thing as us turning around and saying,

'Boys will be boys.' Like they're going to do inappropriate things but they're just being silly. No. Assault is assault. Harassment is harassment. And I think there should be more moral courage at the end of the day addressing that.'

— **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Female**

Participants noted that older Service members may either not be aware of, or may not want to change the military workplace culture due to a perceived comfort with the climate they are familiar with, or their own perception that nothing is wrong with their or their peers' behavior. Although older Service members may be quicker to stomp out sexual assault, there is a noticeably smaller push to change the culture of sexual harassment noted by focus group participants. Participants suggested that even newer leadership might face backlash for changing how sexual harassment is handled because their approaches are not the historic norm.

"But I think it's just older people not accepting that people don't like that, and they just want to stick with what [was] accepted when they came through."

— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

"We get these new commanders and captains that're like 'Look, we can't put up with this [explicit] no more. Somebody got to be held accountable for that.' ... It'll repeat itself, from sexual assault, sexual harassment, you're like, 'Well, [explicit], this [explicit] happened back like five years ago, where they're harassing this Sailor. Why nobody ain't ever address this issue?' Well, they just moved them to a different squadron and it's a pattern." — **Navy, Senior Enlisted**

Tolerance of Sexual Harassment

Participants said that when sexual harassment is ignored, it normalizes sexual harassment and sets a tone that leadership does not actually abide by "zero-tolerance" standards. Some participants said they perceive punishment of higher ranking offenders as more lenient than if the alleged offender had been lower ranking. They attributed this to not wanting to jeopardize the command's career due to a "lapse in judgement" or to their leaders' interest in avoiding the potential backlash they would receive from initiating an extensive, and likely public, investigation. Multiple participants claimed that individuals charged with, and often those alleging, sexual misconduct infractions are simply moved to different posts. However, some participants said that because higher level leaders are held to a higher standard, the slightest allegation would be taken very seriously and result in serious career implications for the alleged offender.

"They say that there is a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to SHARP incidents, like if you sexually assault somebody, if you sexually harass somebody, automatically you're getting kicked out. And that's not always the case. You know, it's happened where seniors are sexually harassing, sexually assaulting junior enlisted Soldiers, whether that be junior officers, NCOs, period, junior Soldiers. It's happening. And their rank is being used to favor them like, 'Oh, well they're a lieutenant colonel' or 'they're this, they're that.' Like it was a lapse in judgment." — **Army, Mid Enlisted, Female**

“And you see new people come in and they address [sexual harassment] and you see a lot of the old ones that’s been in this community, and they just somehow, months go by and everybody just forgets it ever happened. And these complaints and these cases stay open for years. And that Sailor just moved from that squadron and goes back out to his ship or goes someplace else and it just... It’s just a repeat button.” — **Navy, Senior Enlisted**

Focus group participants expressed and said they have observed tolerance and even disregard for lower level sexual harassment behaviors. Some senior enlisted participants indicated believing that some Service members complain too often or are too sensitive to behaviors that fall under the category of sexual harassment, including unwanted comments and the sharing of sexual images. Despite the behaviors potentially being in line with sexual harassment, senior enlisted participants said they believe that Service members should not too be quick to identify themselves as a victim and should address issues among themselves before taking it up the chain of command. Some participants said this lack of regard for the severity of lower level behaviors perpetuates the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace and discourages Service members from disclosing unwanted experiences, which is further addressed in the reporting and response section of Chapter 4.

“Well, it’s just a stupid comment. It could be something as simple as, ‘Oh, those squats are paying off.’ Now, it’s sexual harassment.”

— **Air Force, Senior Enlisted**

“I mean, there is value in owning it. Owning your experience and accepting your responsibility to move on from it. People come into the office all the time to file a complaint, complain about somebody, and you know we’ll listen. ‘All right, so when you addressed it, when you told that person, ‘Don’t say that to me,’ when you corrected your supervisor, what did they say?’ ‘Oh, you didn’t.’ But you’re here now filing a complaint when we could just give people a chance like, ‘Hey, I don’t like that...’ And it could be the end of it, but we don’t emphasize that. It’s always, somebody offends you, run to a helping agency.”

— **Air Force, Senior Enlisted**

Power Dynamics

Similarly, some participants perceived when the alleged offender was a high ranking officer, making an allegation of sexual assault was more risky to the victim than that of sexual harassment. Higher ranking leadership may be more likely to get away with misconduct or at least participants perceive higher ranking leadership as more immune from consequences. Some participants suggested this may be because younger Service members may be viewed as less credible, particularly when raising an allegation against someone higher ranking than they are. This perception may lead fewer Service members to speak up when targeted by a higher-ranking individual.

“You’re not credible because you’ve only been here for a short amount of time and they’ve been in the Marine Corps for eight years or four years. And there’s this little lance [corporal] coming your way...they’re just throwing you to the side,

if that makes sense. And discrediting you. Because you just got here.” —
Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female

Barriers to Reporting

A common reason why participants said they feel sexual harassment continues is because of reporting barriers. Participants shared that even if they were a victim of sexual harassment, they feel they would likely be punished for reporting the incident. One participant explained that the culture of handling issues at the lowest level can create friction within a command.

“On a couple occasions, I’ve had somebody grope me and I almost flipped [explicit]. They kind of gave me a slap on the wrist and this person just got away with it, but I’m the one that’s getting chewed out because I almost... I probably would’ve went to Captain’s Mast, probably been put out [of] the Navy, really.”
— **Navy, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Participants noted that sexual harassment may also persist due to investigative barriers. SAPR/SHARP responder participants noted that sexual harassment investigations are difficult and often get brushed under the rug due to the circumstantial nature. Even when victims have substantial evidence, sexual harassment cases often go cold without any legal action.

“There’s nothing we can do because people come to us all the time, and they’re like, ‘Well, this is happening, this is happening.’ And we’re like, ‘[Explicit], that sucks. You should tell your command you need an MPO [i.e., military protection order].’ ... And that’s what we tell people. And it’s really [explicit], but that’s all we can do. So even as law enforcement, we can’t do anything for you.”
— **Army, Mid Enlisted, Female**

Preventing Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

Participants were also asked how sexual harassment might be reduced in the military. Participants acknowledged that the military is not the only industry with sexual harassment cases, but rather, there are unique pressures that are distinct from the civilian sector. Common prevention strategies proposed by focus group participants included improving the training structure and content across ranks, fostering accountability and respect, creating an environment where inappropriate behavior can be called out, and ensuring leadership provides a positive example for lower ranks of Service members. An overview of participant perceptions regarding training can be found in Chapter 4.

“I think it’s very important to point out that in these circumstances we have these different levels that we can go to such as IG [i.e., inspector general], or to OSI [i.e., U.S. Air Force Office of Special Investigations], or to any of these places, but everything gets pushed back down to the lower level, and gets investigated at the lower level, and then we’re now dealing with our direct supervisors, our direct commander, whatever, and then it has a detrimental effect.”
— **Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Female**

Consistency in Accountability

Participants recommended fostering an environment where people are respected and held accountable for their actions. They pointed out that when inappropriate behaviors and language are inconsistently enforced or tolerated, it diminishes respect and accountability for everyone in the unit. Sexual harassment can be mitigated by fostering a respectful environment, and by encouraging unwavering professionalism. When Service members violate this respect, they should be consistently held accountable for their actions regardless of rank or gender.

“Definitely about respect, because, at the end of the day, we’re equals around the board. You know what I mean? ... Just because one of your colleagues is a female [Service member], don’t be sitting there groping her, or sitting there just, literally, at her neck all day long. Get some work done, you know what I mean? Respect your shipmates. Have some self-control.”

— **Navy, Junior Enlisted, Male**

“I think in my office there’s a lot of almost favoritism. They don’t mean it to come out that way, but they think that because they’re a better worker, they’re going to let things slide a little bit more. And I don’t think that they realize they’re doing that. But, if you’re consistent across the board with everybody, it’ll stop comments, it’ll stop jokes and they’ll eventually learn to not do it.”

— **Air Force, Junior Enlisted, Female**

“It’s up to each commander based on each case but, to me, it does look like over a span of years, that women do get punished less harshly... But, women, to me, tend to get more verbal counseling, counseling sides versus when I see men getting substantiated harassment, it’s usually a lot harsher than that.”

— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Recognizing Inappropriate Behavior

Participants reiterated the importance of identifying and reporting sexual harassment as an effective prevention method. Creating environments where Service members can speak out against sexual harassment among their peers and leadership without a fear of being reprimanded or punished for speaking up was proposed. Participants also proposed that when Service members are called out on their negative actions, sexual harassment in the workplace will decline.

“To make them more comfortable to speak up, ensure that they understand that they will not be looked at any different because of them speaking up to something wrong being done. Enforcing an environment where it’s known that if you speak up, you will not be treated any differently. If someone treats you differently then there will be consequences for them.” — **Marine Corps, Mid Enlisted, Female**

Leaders as Effective Role Models

Higher ranking participants emphasized that leadership needs to set a good example for how other Service members should behave, speak, and respond to one another. When leaders set the tone for what is appropriate behavior and what behavior will not be tolerated, participants confirmed their command will follow. They reiterated the importance that leaders really must show they have a zero-tolerance policy. Participants further highlighted that when it comes to sexual assault and sexual harassment, leadership should have an open-door policy and demonstrate that their conversations will be taken seriously.

“I think it goes back to that buy in. They have to basically let the members know that if they come to leadership with a general complaint or any sort of complaint, like with being harassed or being gawked at or anything, that the leadership team's going to have their back and they're not going to just brush it under the rug.” — Air Force, Senior Enlisted

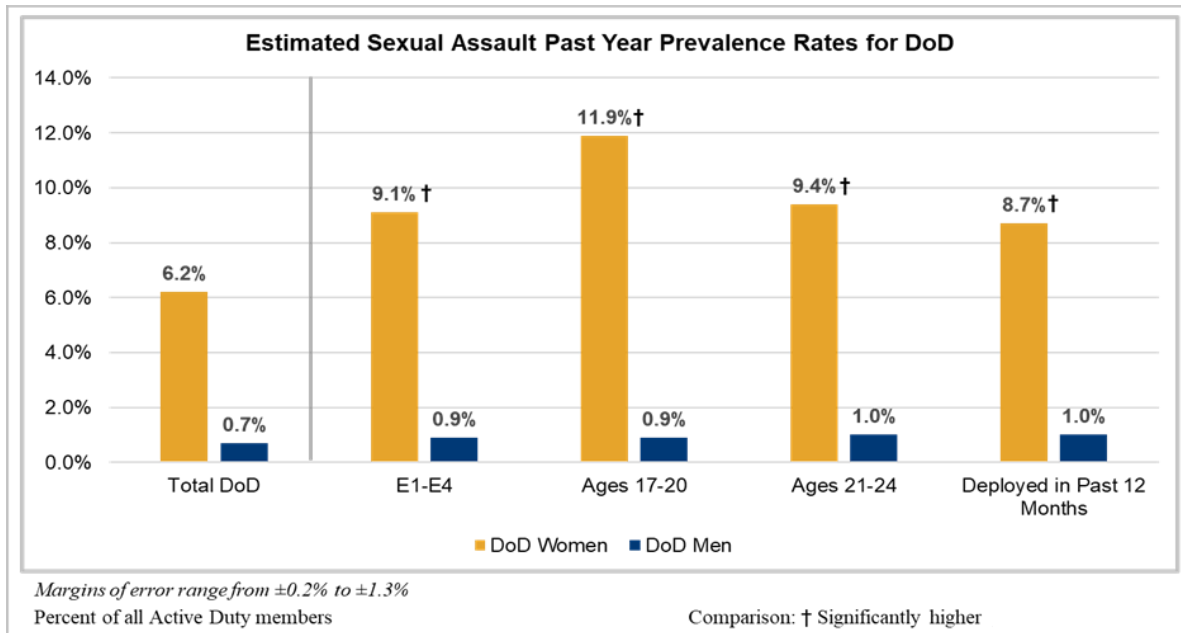
Participants noted that when they did hear about an issue that had occurred, they recalled that leadership addressed the incident “properly” and did so promptly. Participants also shared that they had heard about or witnessed dramatic positive shifts in culture and attributed these shifts to their leaders’ response to improving group cohesion and addressing incidents when they occur.

Case Characteristics of Reported Sexual Assaults

Determining risk factors for sexual assault is an important aspect of prevention efforts for leaders and for SAPR/SHARP professionals. During the focus groups, SAPR/SHARP professional participants were asked to identify common themes across reported cases of sexual assault, characteristics of cases at their current or previous installations, and installation characteristics that make Service members at higher or lower risk for experiencing sexual assault. Prominent themes regarding installation location, Service member age, and gender differences were discussed as contributing to the risk of sexual assault for Service members. It is noteworthy that because sexual assault is largely underreported, characteristics of unreported sexual assault may differ from those incidents that result in a report. SAPR/SHARP professional participants were asked about their reported cases, which may not share the same characteristics of incidents not reported to SAPR/SHARP professionals.

Figure 6 provides the rates of past-year sexual assault for high-risk subpopulations of active duty Service members, as determined from the *2018 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members (WGRA)* report. Of these subpopulations, younger Service members (i.e., Service members between the ages of 17-24) will be further discussed in the following section because of their significantly higher rate of sexual assault than other subpopulations. For a thorough breakdown of sexual assault prevalence rates for other active duty subpopulations, refer to the *2018 WGRA* report.

Figure 6.
Estimated Sexual Assault Prevalence Rates for High Risk Groups



Perceptions of Alleged Offenders

In general, SAPR/SHARP responder participants believed that there are common themes regarding perceptions of alleged offenders in reported cases of sexual assault. The alleged offender is often someone close to the victim or someone that the victim trusts. These cases may occur while they are in a comfortable setting with the alleged offender or when the alleged offender is walking the victim home. SAPR/SHARP responder participants said the victims' vulnerability with other Service members is attributed to the emphasis on brotherhood and sisterhood and trusting fellow Service members. SAPR/SHARP responder participants described that victims can be unsuspecting of certain behaviors because they do not expect a Service member, deemed their brother or sister, to assault them.

"I'd say that the overwhelming number of cases that I see, the offender is known to the victim. Either it's a consensual relationship, and then there's an encounter that is not consensual, or it's a pattern of abusive behavior. But most of the ones that I have, there's some kind of preexisting relationship."

— **Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

"So, of course, the Marine Corps, you're my brother, you're my sister. We feed into that, we believe it, so you're like 'You know what? There's no way this individual is going to do anything to harm me at all. I can be in any kind of situation and I know they'll take care of me.' When, in some case, that's not how it goes."

— **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Service Partners as Alleged Offenders

SAPR/SHARP responder participants acknowledged sentiments among Service members that there is hypocrisy and inconsistent messaging from their Service when it comes to battle buddies/wingmen and alleged offenders. Although Service members are told that they should trust their fellow Service members, especially their wingman or battle buddy, that person may be the one who sexually assaulted or harassed them. When Service members are assaulted by a fellow Service member, SAPR/SHARP responder participants said that victims can feel confusion, shame, and guilt about their unwanted experience.

“When you're taught to trust your wingman or trust your battle buddies, and then you have people who can recognize that as a vulnerability, it makes it really hard and you're more likely to fall victim again. And then it's even worse. And just as [participant] mentioned, then you see that you violated that trust and that's why you notice that hypocrisy. You taught us to trust our wingman because so much of the time, it's not a stranger. It is your wingman. ‘Oh, I'll walk you home. I'll walk you to your dorm. But I'm going to be the one to take advantage of you.’”

— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Authority can be Used in Grooming

In addition to alleged offenders being someone the victim knows, SAPR/SHARP responder participants indicated that they receive reports in which the alleged offender is someone in a position of power over the victim. SAPR/SHARP responder participants identified that in some reported cases, authoritative figures allegedly groom subordinates in order to sexually assault them. The act of grooming is described as giving specific attention to a Service member over a period of time in order for the alleged offender to create an opportunity to be able to sexually assault their victim.

“Seniors grooming their subordinates and making those targets of opportunity happen. For instance, I'm a senior, I'm going to make you feel special, I'm taking you through the grooming process, then I'm going to invite myself or create a poker game at your residence, and I'm going to invite everybody. However, when I get there, I am going to target you. I'm going to get your spouse totally ripped, drunk, and they're going to pass out, then I'm going to take advantage of you.” — **Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Alleged Workplace Offenders

Participants identified the workplace as an area where Service members are comfortable with each other. SAPR/SHARP responder participants noted that because of a comfort in the workplace, reported cases often involve alleged offenders who work alongside their victims and perpetrate within the workplace setting itself. Alleged offenders in the workplace may begin with initiating lower level behaviors. When these behaviors are unchecked or ignored, it allows the alleged offender to commit behaviors that increase in severity.

“In the work center, usually that person says a joke. It may be somebody who has already said inappropriate jokes, and [they] look and see who reacts, who is offended, who doesn’t say anything, who laughs, and they know [how] far they can go. They may go from a joke here to a touch there, and they just build that over time, so when the big thing happens, they were building up to that. That’s why they’re able to keep doing it, because then they know, ‘I know she’s not going to say anything. I know he’s just going to laugh.’”

— Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder

Cases Involving Young Service Members

Results from the 2018 WGRA found that active duty women between the ages of 17–20 and 21–24 experience higher rates of sexual assault than women 25-years-old or older. Identifying case factors unique to younger Service members is an important aspect of preventing sexual assault among this high-risk population. Participants identified a number of factors, including alcohol use, being a student/trainee, and a lack of knowledge of sexual assault and sexual harassment that differentiates cases for younger Service members (ages 18–24) from older Service member (25 and older).

Participants across varying pay grades acknowledged that younger Service members and first-term Service members are more at risk for sexual assault. SAPR/SHARP responder participants explained that most of their cases involve victims and alleged offenders who are both younger Service members. Some SAPR/SHARP responder participants attributed the higher risk among younger Service members to the fact that they do not have as much experience interacting with their gender of interest, leading them to experiment with interactions that are sometimes inappropriate. Participants also indicated that although older Service members may have a better understanding of boundaries and where to draw the line, younger Service members are not as aware of boundaries and do not always know how to identify sexual assault and sexual harassment. SAPR/SHARP responder participants said they believe younger Service members’ inability to identify sexual assault or sexual harassment is due to their inexperience as Service members and not having gone through as many trainings. These comments appeared to identify a separate group of young Service members than those described by participants as more attuned to the presence and impact of negative behaviors.

“I would say sometimes with the younger Sailors, they don’t necessarily know how to identify what actually is sexual assault or would be classified as harassment. Some may think, ‘Oh, I got drunk this night. I don’t know what happened. I woke up in this other person’s bed or whatever the case may be.’ They don’t realize that that’s assault, as opposed to someone that’s been in for a little while longer, that have sat through enough bystander intervention trainings, that have gone through the different types of training, they know whether I remember it or not, I know I can’t say that I fully 100% consented to what happened last night.” — Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder

An important factor in discussing risk among younger Service members is their use of alcohol in comparison to older Service members. SAPR/SHARP responder participants explained that

larger proportions of younger Service members, especially those without families, engage in heavy drinking and partying, which in turn leads to sexual assault and other risky behaviors. Moreover, younger Service members are described as having less experience drinking in moderation and are less aware of their limits. However, SAPR/SHARP responder participants explained that if an incident involves alcohol with Service members under the age of 21, they are less likely to come forward.

“I think when you have a bigger population of younger Sailors, like in a training-centric command, that don't necessarily have families or established homes, they tend to party and drink more, and that I think leads to more sexual assaults.”

— **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

“I would say people who are under the age of 21 who were drinking are probably less likely to come forward because they don't want to get into trouble with their commands for underage drinking.” — **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Gender Differences in Cases

SAPR/SHARP responder participants were asked to identify unique factors in cases involving female victims and cases involving male victims. Notable differences that were identified included alleged offender behaviors, perceptions of victims, and factors that impact reporting.

Cases with Female Victims

Some SAPR/SHARP responder participants indicated seeing more female cases than male cases, which is consistent with the higher rates of reporting among female victims compared to male victims (SAPRO, 2018). When discussing the female cases they have encountered, SAPR/SHARP responder participants identified female victims as generally being fearful to come forward and disclose their unwanted experience due to not wanting to be labeled a liar. SAPR/SHARP responder participants described how peer reactions may include calling the victim a liar, creating an even more difficult situation for the female victim.

“As far as with the women, a lot of women are scared to come forward in situations because of labels as well because the first thing someone's going to say is that she's lying. Then, now you're a victim. You have the situation going on, and then now everyone's coming at you because they're like, ‘Oh well, she lied,’ and this, this, and this. It's a real hard situation on both ends.”

— **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Cases with Male Victims

SAPR/SHARP responder participants said they perceive that there has been an increase in reported cases of sexual assault involving male victims. When identifying various factors of these cases, SAPR/SHARP responder participants indicated that reported cases involving male victims more often involve violence and hazing. This is a pattern that was also seen in the 2018 WGRA, which found that male victims more often characterize their experience of sexual assault as involving hazing, compared to female sexual assault victims (OPA, 2019b). SAPR/SHARP

responder participants described that hazing that occurs is often deemed as normal or as part of a “game,” but when unreported it can lead to the sexual assault.

“A lot of our male victim cases I’ve seen especially recently begins with them having a hazing. Things that we identify more as hazing and more certainly harassment, then leading up to what’s classified as the sexual assault. There is an opportunity there to notice or report that behavior at the other levels before it’s something that escalates and again, both specifically in male cases, we’ve seen the intent to haze and/or harass before its acted on.”

— **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

In addition, SAPR/SHARP responder participants remarked that male victims are less likely to speak up or report and do not want to talk about their experience or have anyone know what happened. If male victims do report, they are perceived to be more likely to make a delayed report and a restricted report rather than an unrestricted report. SAPR/SHARP responder participants explained that male victims’ unwillingness to report stems from stigmas surrounding perceived threats to masculinity and sexuality, and reluctance among male Service members to identify as a victim. Additionally, when cases involving male victims are prosecuted, SAPR/SHARP responders perceive alleged female offenders as receiving less harsh punishments than alleged male offenders.

“As far as cases with men, a lot of men don’t report. That’s one of the major issues because men, it’s a pride thing I would say, that they feel like they can’t ever get raped or bad things can’t happen to them. Sometimes it does happen in certain cases, and they don’t want to be labeled as, ‘Oh, I was a victim. Something happened to me,’ because now everyone has a name for that person. Some people like, ‘Oh, that happened to you? You’re gay,’ or ‘You’re this, you’re that.’ That’s one of the faults that sexual assault has with men.”

— **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Despite some of the perceived challenges that come with cases involving male victims, SAPR/SHARP responder participants expressed a belief that male cases are taken more seriously now than they have been in the past. They explained how locker room behaviors that have generally been the norm in military culture are now becoming less acceptable, allowing male Service members to feel more comfortable speaking up when they experience these behaviors.

“I’ve seen at least an increase in male harassment being reported, that locker room behavior that may or may not have been okay a decade ago. It seems like the message at least is getting out that that’s no longer acceptable... We’re definitely, I think, seeing a lot more [male Service members] report saying, ‘Hey, this is no longer acceptable,’ so I would say we have seen an increase in that.”

— **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Other Themes

SAPR/SHARP responder participants were asked to discuss additional themes of cases, including cases that involve alcohol and the role of social media and dating apps.

Alcohol

Prior research has suggested that alcohol plays a large role in cases of sexual assault, especially in putting people in vulnerable situations. Results from the 2018 WGRA demonstrate that alcohol was involved in about two-thirds of sexual assault incidents involving DoD women and about half for DoD men (OPA, 2019b). Focus group participants identified alcohol use as a means to escape from stress and take a break from their duties. When discussing cases involving alcohol, SAPR/SHARP responder participants indicated having some cases involving either the victim, the alleged offender or both drinking.

“I’m still seeing a lot of alcohol involvement just across the board. A lot of alcohol involvement in some way. Whether the subject and the victim, or just the subject, or just the victim. But a lot of the cases had a lot of alcohol involved.”

— **Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

The rise in the popularity of ride-sharing applications has introduced a new level of risk with regard to alcohol’s involvement in sexual assault cases. With the availability of Uber, Lyft, and other applications that provide transportation, there is less of a need for a designated driver and, thereby, a designated sober friend. With the elimination of a sober friend, there is no longer a Service member who can aid in safety and intervention when Service members are off-base engaging in alcohol-related activities.

“I know I used to say that the [designated driver] should be that sober person who can intervene, that you can count on to intervene. But you don’t need a DD [i.e., designated driver] if you have an Uber. That discussion of a DD has kind of morphed with ride-sharing being so popular.”

— **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

A pertinent aspect of cases involving alcohol is that they typically involve questions of whether consent was given. SAPR/SHARP responder participants indicated that Service members have trouble identifying what constitutes consent and when someone can or cannot consent, especially when alcohol is involved. Simultaneously, messaging from leaders can also be conflicting on what constitutes consent when alcohol is involved, further contributing to confusion.

“I don’t think we do a good job explaining what consent is... I remember hearing a master chief say, ‘If you have one beer, you can’t consent.’ There’s this weird spectrum of when you can and cannot consent, and so I think it’s hard to define consent in the fleet. I would say the vast majority of sexual assault in the Navy is alcohol induced, and sometimes there’s that gray area, whether there is or is not consent.” — **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Risky behaviors may be mitigated by encouraging more enforcement of the alcohol policy. However, participants explained that security patrols can be hesitant to enforce alcohol policy for fear of being accused of “ratting.” If they are deemed as someone who tells on Service members, they may face social consequences from their peers.

“It’s also like duty [those Service members tasked with patrolling installations and ensuring the security of residents] knows the people in the barracks. So even if they see it, they’re not going to just snitch on their boys. They’re not going to say nothing.” — **Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Social Media and Dating Apps

Dating apps and social media were identified as continuing to play a role in cases of sexual assault. SAPR/SHARP responder participants indicated that dating apps and social media generally result in a lack of in-person interactions between Service members. Dating apps and social media were described as serving as the starting point for Service members to meet. However, unclear communication on social media can lead to misunderstandings about expectations. For example, participants pointed out that online communication or alluding to plans such as “Netflix and chill” may be confusing for Service members who may interpret the invitation to hang out as something more than only watching a movie. SAPR/SHARP responder participants explained that these misunderstandings can lead to unwanted sexual acts toward another Service member.

“What we’ll see is an exchange that could be construed as an agreement to sexual acts, but they’re doing it behind a screen. They’re much more forthcoming and explicit about sexual interactions. And then going back to the person that doesn’t really know how to have that conversation in real life. Then you put them together in a room, and the vibe changes, or they change their mind. And that same person, they might have vaginal sex and then force a sodomy. And then the premise is that it was consensual, but not all the sexual acts were consensual.” — **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

“I think sometimes they’re on Tinder, using it, and they have certain types of dialogue with each other that kind of may allude that things are okay but then when they get in person they’re like, ‘Well, you said this in Tinder but now you’re saying I can’t do it now?’ They don’t understand what the boundaries are in that relationship.” — **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Location-Specific Characteristics of Risk

Many participants noted that the geographic factors of an installation significantly impact the culture. Participants at remote installations often discussed having little in the way of recreation, which greatly contributes to a universal sense of boredom, whereas other installations located more closely to urban areas or certain outside of the continental U.S. (OCONUS) locations were perceived as having more recreation. Participants noted that these factors contribute to installations having particular reputations, and therefore, some installations are more desirable

for duty than others. This desirability may contribute to a feeling of despair for Service members assigned to what may be considered an undesirable duty station, driving a need for recreation and diversion. Some participants discussed a general divide between installations on the east and west coasts of the United States in both a positive and negative light: west coast installations were described as relaxed or slack, and east coast installations were often described as effective but also high strung.

General Installation Characteristics

SAPR/SHARP responder participants also identified more general installation characteristics that may increase risky behaviors, such as alcohol use, and thereby, increase the risk for sexual assault among Service members. Participants indicated that Service members at more isolated CONUS installations or locations with few recreational activities turn to drinking as an activity due to more limited options in terms of non-alcohol-related recreational activities. Feelings of isolation within the Service are particularly prevalent for younger, student populations away from home and without families. Because of the higher prevalence of alcohol consumption among those populations, more alcohol-related unwanted incidents occur.

“There’s nothing better to do, especially for the student population. They don’t have cars, don’t have money, they can’t go out in town, and get away from the base. So, when you’re stuck around the same 1,500 people for months at a time, incidents are going to pop up. Drinking is going to be involved, underage, because like I said, there’s not much else to do, specifically on this base.”

— **Marine Corps, Mid-Enlisted, Male**

“People are just getting locked in here and I feel like people would just lose their minds because they got locked into something they didn’t want to be in. And they just lose themselves in general, whether it be in a situation of sexual assault, sexual harassment or something else. I think people just get locked in and kind of lose themselves. And most of it has to do with alcohol. Most, I would say like 99% of the cases that are on this base have to do with sexual assault, sexual harassment also have to do with an intense consumption of alcohol. An intense consumption.” — **Army, Junior Enlisted, Male**

Participants also noted that both an installation’s size, as well as the types of units present contributes to an installation’s culture. Participants discussed how this culture directly impacts how individuals behave and interact with other Service members.

“People approach one another and talk to one another completely different than if you were to go to like [a larger installation] where it’s just a hot mess of 60,000 Soldiers running around.” — **Army, Senior Enlisted**

“I work with people who work over there with [Federal Agency], and [explicit] like that... And it’s all these high-ranking people. So, on one hand, it’s a lot more uptight in the sense that you gotta really watch what you say, what you do. Which puts added stressors onto you on a daily. Versus like my last unit, I was with a bunch of grads in infantry. I was with [them] all the time. That was my group.

Then I could say whatever the [explicit] I wanted was because we're all peers, versus somewhere where this geographical location, you don't know. We could have the vice president [explicit] walk in one day, just because he gives a [explicit].” — Army, Mid-Enlisted, Male

Another general installation attribute related to sexual assault risk was the type of installation. Participants identified training installations as centers of risky behaviors. Training installation populations include large numbers of Service members who are young and from varying Services, occupations, and upbringings. Participants indicated cases at training installations are distinguishable from non-training installations in that they largely involve students due to the clash of culture and varying upbringings the students come from. The varying upbringings are described as causing misinterpretations in boundaries and communications that can lead to unwanted behaviors taking place.

“This being one of the biggest training areas probably in the Armed Forces, we get a lot of different services that come through here with a lot of different ways that they run their programs and a lot of different mentalities and a lot of different culture. And when you’re bringing them all into one training area at once, then there’s bound to be incidents and stuff happening because of that... So, one culture interacting with another culture, then you have some kind of misunderstanding. And generally, the misunderstanding is related to sexual assault.” — Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder

Participants listed a number of locations where they have witnessed or experienced risky behaviors (e.g., staring and gawking, verbal harassment, alcohol use getting out of hand). The most common locations are summarized in this section. Particular emphasis has been paid to identifying characteristics common to the type of location across installations as well as to highlighting focus group participants’ recommendations for mitigating risk.

Key Locations for Risky Behaviors

Most participants reported that they feel safest when they are on-base; however, many who said that they do not feel safe on-base attributed this perception to the lack of physical security or poor maintenance of existing physical security systems. Most often broken security cameras, a lack of patrols, broken locks or accessible master keys, and disengaged or absent duty were cited. Some female participants described not using ear plugs or eye pillows in public or in their barracks or housing for fear of being unable to anticipate a potential assault. Other locations commonly noted by participants as loci of risky behaviors included workplaces, barracks and military housing, and the gym.

“I know one of the Marines felt unsafe because the security cameras were not functioning, but that was also because the contract for the security cameras fell out of this long, drawn out Marine Corps acquisition process to get the new contract up to get the cameras working again.”
— Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Male

Workplace

Participants described staring, verbal harassment, unwanted touching, and the sharing of explicit images as problematic behaviors that can occur in the workplace. Alleged perpetrators are often subtle or make some attempt to hide their behavior, which can make it more difficult for Service members to call out that behavior to others.

“There is unwanted touching. Definitely. But it's because I'm trying to help them out because they're on the ladder or because something is too heavy. That's their excuse because they can use a workplace excuse.”

— **Navy, Mid Enlisted, Female**

“But I know that at work usually some people may or may not experience some staring or some verbal harassment. It's just a pretty commonplace.”

— **Air Force, Mid Enlisted, Female**

Participants shared that explicit images may be easily shared in the workplace. This behavior can be indirect, such as seeing a coworker's phone screen while they are viewing explicit images, or when images are directly shared among coworkers. They further noted that at times, the shared images are of fellow Service members. Female participants said they feel that these exchanges, inadvertent or not, create an uncomfortable work environment.

“...their work center or workplace generally speaking isn't as safe as we perceive, and they are sharing images and unwanted touching or verbal harassment.” — **Navy, Junior Officer, Male**

“In the workplaces, we saw increase of sharing of explicit comments, images and stuff. So, that's starting to increase in the workplace as well.”

— **Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Participants attributed many of these behaviors to alleged perpetrators' perspectives on workplace norms. For example, they noted that some alleged perpetrators have not been taught professional behavior or may have come from other workplaces where inappropriate behavior was acceptable or even promoted. Gender, upbringing, deployment history, and occupation were also noted as creating variations in norms.

“It's what we talked about, you know, the culture, the environment. Because I'll tell you, in my position, where I'm at now it doesn't happen, because of what type of people we have. And then you go over there and it's accepted.”

— **Air Force, Senior Enlisted**

“[Occupation] do their jobs and not always harassment, but there's always non-PC [i.e., politically correct] stuff. All the time.”

— **Air Force, Mid Enlisted, Male**

Barracks

Participants described alcohol usage, sexual assault, unwanted touching, verbal harassment, and sharing explicit images as occurring frequently in the barracks. Participants attributed the frequency of the behaviors to the privacy of the rooms and the proximity to many other Service members, particularly younger Service members. Participants also described one type of potentially risky location on-base, the “smoke pits,” which refers to a designated area where smoking is allowed. Junior enlisted focus group participants further identified smoke pits as gathering points for barracks residents in which underage drinking and alcohol use can be prevalent. According to participants, because barracks residents and others on-base gather at these sites, there is irregular accountability for providing underage residents with alcohol, whether intentional or not.

“You can literally walk around on a Saturday night and go to any smoke pit. Someone's out there drinking. They'll just pass you a beer.”

— **Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Male**

“Because you can't party in your room, so they bring all the alcohol outside and then it's really easy for an 18-year-old to come out there and start drinking... They all know to say nobody gave it to them. Like, I went to the bathroom and he might've filled up his cup while I was gone and I didn't realize it, because then that way they don't get in trouble.” — **Navy, Mid Enlisted, Male**

Many of these behaviors, particularly alcohol use, were attributed to the young age of many of the barracks residents and the new independence of living away from home. Participants emphasized that most young Service members are well-intentioned hard workers, but are still young adults, many of whom are receiving a steady paycheck for the first time, and many of whom are performing a stressful job.

“First time away from home, for most of them. And you're giving them a job, and then you're like, ‘Hey, on the weekends, we're going to put you in the middle of this complex where essentially everybody just parties. Okay, go. Don't do anything bad.’ I mean, bad decisions are going to be made and it's the nature of it. You can obviously do all the things that, as leaders, you should be to educate your Marines on how not to do things to put themselves or the Marine Corps, or any of their friends in a negative situation, but they're 18- and 19-year-old kids, sometimes bad things are going to happen because sometimes you're going to make dumb choices.” — **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Male**

“When you're a junior Sailor, well I mean if my bed's right there, we don't need one person to be sober. We can all just drink because at the end, they were all just going to go to bed anyways... The barracks is their home, at that point, and they're going to do as they please.” — **Navy, Mid Enlisted, Female**

Many participants described the barracks as a key site for alcohol-related sexual assault. Service members living in the barracks often work with the same peers they live with. This can lead to a sense of increased familiarity, purely due to the amount of time spent together. A false sense of

security among peers paired with an abundance of alcohol can, unfortunately, increase the risk of incidents.

“For the barracks you have a lot of junior Sailors that know each other. Either they work with each other, they know each other. When they're in the barracks partying, having fun they don't think anything's going to happen to them. And when the alcohol starts flowing then that's when the predators among their peers usually come by, ‘Hey, let me take you back to your room.’ And then that's when there's a sexual assault, either female or male.” — **Navy, Senior Enlisted**

The barracks were also regarded as a potentially unsafe space for women. Participants described a lack of physical security, leading to break-ins and theft, which sometimes culminates in a sexual assault. Some female participants said that they were told by other Service members to avoid certain floors or living in the barracks altogether due to a fear of sexual assault. Some female participants mentioned that catcalling outside of the barracks also makes them feel uneasy.

“When I first got here, all the people in my shop specifically, they live on third deck and I got put on first deck. And when I asked why, they said it's because I was going to get raped if I lived on third deck.”
— **Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female**

“You have alcohol use everywhere. It gets out of hand almost every night of the weekends, sharing of explicit imagery everywhere, feeling unsafe. There was once, a young lady that literally came out from hiding behind bushes. And I was like, ‘What are you doing back there?’ And she's like, ‘I don't feel safe.’ I went and got a female RA [i.e., resident advisor] and she escorted her up to her room. She said nothing happened to her, but something happened to her roommate, and it's already been reported, and she feels like the person's out to get both of them.”
— **Navy, Mid Enlisted, Male**

Military Housing

Participants discussed how alcohol usage, sexual assault, unwanted touching, verbal harassment, and the sharing of explicit can occur in military housing. Residents also reported that their spouses and children at times have felt unsafe due to staring and gawking. Because alcohol possession is limited in some barracks, participants reported that younger Service members often attend parties in military housing, where there are no alcohol limits. Participants also noted that the segregation of pay grades within housing also causes a lack of accountability.

“I feel like that's where you could see everything because whenever you're in the sanctity of your own home, you have no idea what a person is like when they are actually at their house. They could be a completely different person than they give off the rest of their coworkers. Anything could happen when you're in a house... It's like you feel safer at home so you're going to be more yourself so if you lean towards those tendencies of getting out of hand with things, that's what's going to happen.” — **Air Force, Junior Officer, Female**

“I think the Marine Corps needs to change that mindset of how they segregate. I mean, of course, you have the staff COs, you have the officers, you have the E5 and below, but if you put leadership within the E4 housing, or E5 housing... Then there's no accountability with your peer-to-peer, unless you hold each other accountable and so that's where a lot of the problems [occur]. Then, all the senior guys like us are getting calls.” — **Marine Corps, Mid Enlisted, Male**

Some participants discussed how military housing is an area where behaviors occur between Service members with spouses or toward a Service member's spouse, specifically referencing situations involving a senior Service member engaging with the spouse of a younger Service member who was away on deployment. Physical security was described as less prominent in military housing, as opposed to the barracks. Patrols are less frequent and housing residents are often allowed more flexibility with regulations like when quiet hours are enforced, leading to parties going on late into the night.

“It's a neighborhood, and just with the Navy in general and just the fact that we have people from all walks of life, just like the barracks, you're going to have all sorts of behavior mixed into it. Even that could occur with spouse-on-spouse as well... I pretty much have a list of everything going on there, whether it be through a family member or from neighbors or who knows.”
— **Navy, Junior Officer, Male**

“There wasn't really like a duty. I mean I know PMO [i.e., Provost Marshal Office] drove around and stuff like that, but you'd have Marines that are deployed, and then you'd have senior Marines going over to Marines' wives' houses and doing crazy stuff and whatnot. There was a lot of issues in base housing as well with alcohol use, and abuse, and parties that turned into sexual assault and what not as well.” — **Marine Corps, Senior Enlisted**

The Gym

According to participants, staring and gawking are two behaviors that occur at gyms and recreational facilities on-base at their installations. Female participants often attributed this to the gender disparity within their Service or installation, and at times, perceived that male members go to the gym to watch females or spend their gym time watching female Service members working out. Male and female participants also described staring and gawking as a non-sexual critique of another's physique and how it negatively affects their own body image and comfort level at the gym. Male and female participants noted that unwanted touching is prevalent in gym and recreational facilities, which further adds to any discomfort in these settings.

“I historically avoided Marine Corps gyms because I can't stand Marines looking at me. You're already an alien because you're a woman in the Marine Corps and it's like the moment that you throw on a tank top or you actually start doing some sort of weightlifting, they immediately sexualize you.”
— **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Female**

“It's, for some people, a vulnerable situation because going to the gym, they're not very fit, their body image is all over the place because they're in that phase where you have to get used to everything.”

— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

The gym offers an environment for Service members to interact with each other outside of uniform. Male and female Service member participants expressed concern over the role that clothing plays in unwanted behaviors and the level of clothing that is appropriate in the gym context. The level of responsibility attributed to a victim's clothing varied across Services and installations.

“It takes away my motivation of going to the gym because, what can I wear that won't make someone look at me? I don't think it should be that way. I feel like I should be able to wear whatever I want and feel comfortable going in there.”

— **Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Female participants described using a number of protective strategies to either discourage problematic behavior or to distract from it while at the gym, such as wearing headphones to prevent being approached by other gym-goers or to help ignore staring and gawking. Although some participants confronted alleged perpetrators about their actions, many participants described leaving the gym or attending a gym that is open with later hours to avoid confrontation. Both male and female participants described working out with a buddy or a group as a protective strategy to ensure someone else's safety.

“I think that the fact that we have so many gyms available and that a lot of them are open late, that gives us options. But the fact that we're the ones holding the keys between our fingers and changing my routine because how I feel uncomfortable, and that's the one thing.”

— **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Female**

“I've brought my headphones and that helps me out. ‘I don't want to talk to you...’ I started wearing a wedding ring even though I'm not legally married.”

— **Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Male participants reported varied levels of comfort with bystander intervention at the gym. Some said that when unwanted behaviors escalate, another gym-goer will step in, whereas others expressed concern over being able to identify which behaviors require intervention.

“The touching, sometimes it's hard to judge because you don't know if somebody's [a] friend and they're actually trying to help them out. And they're simply like, ‘Hey do it this way,’ or something like that.” — **Air Force, Senior Enlisted**

OCONUS Locations and Ships

In addition to CONUS installation specifics, participants noted several attributes of OCONUS locations and ships that contribute to cases of sexual assault and impact the risk of sexual assault.

Results from the 2018 WGRA found that female Service members who were deployed in the 12 months before the survey had a significantly higher prevalence of sexual assault than those who had not deployed. Factors identified as increasing the risk of sexual assault at OCONUS installations and ships included a heavy drinking culture, sentiments of isolation, and large, concentrated populations of younger Service members.

Participants typically identified OCONUS locations as having a particularly tight-knit community due to the limitations of being abroad. Service members generally spend more time together on base. There is a sense of togetherness that is perceived as stronger than the cohesion among Service members at CONUS locations, where installation culture involves Service members leaving base and going home after duty-hours. Increased cohesion at OCONUS locations may serve as a protective factor for Service members looking out for one another to prevent sexual assault, but may also make reporting an instance of sexual assault more difficult due to concerns about the potential impact reporting a fellow Service member may have on group cohesion.

“And in my opinion, overseas you do have more of a tight knit type of family versus state side because it’s not forced.”

— **Air Force, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Culture of Alcohol Use. Participants indicated some OCONUS locations are known as having a more significant alcohol culture than CONUS locations. Similar to some CONUS installations, there is a lack of mobility for Service members at some OCONUS installations due to a lack of transportation and activities. As a result, Service members’ activities of choice generally include alcohol consumption.

“Sailors tend to, especially enlisted Sailors, tend to not have a lot of freedom to move around, so I know a lot of them, they hang out and drink. I feel like we might get less reports of sexual assault here than in [OCONUS location] because in [OCONUS location] it was daily. There would be some sort of accusation at the commands.” — **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

At OCONUS installations, participants described a prominent drinking culture among young and first-term Service members. SAPR/SHARP responder participants mentioned that younger Service members, who would not be able to drink at CONUS locations, are able to engage in alcohol consumption OCONUS due to lower drinking ages abroad. A lower drinking age accompanied by the fact that many younger Service members may be away from home for the first time results in a unique risk of over drinking and unwanted behaviors for young Service members abroad.

“When you combine first-termers and [OCONUS location] together, that increases it twofold. It makes it even worse when you get someone who’s 17-, 18-years-old, never been away from home, and you throw them in [OCONUS location] with all these other people and they just sometimes want to be free.”

— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Unique Risk on Ships. Although OCONUS locations have unique attributes, offshore components, such as ships, also have a unique set of attributes that contribute to the risk of sexual assault and the types of sexual assault cases. In general, ships are more secluded and restricted in area and mobility than onshore installations. Service members are even more restricted in that they see the same people all the time. SAPR/SHARP responder participants described how the close proximity within ships results in more sexual assault cases due to more opportunities to offend. Simultaneously, SAPR/SHARP responder participants explained that seeing and interacting with the same Service members allows alleged offenders to see who will or will not report them for their actions.

“Is it just proximity? A crime of opportunity? Because we’re all in these really small berthing areas now and, truly, I can reach over and touch somebody. You can’t find any other motive. There’s no history there. It’s really just a crime of opportunity.” — **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

“Imagine being out to sea for months at a time, restricted and seeing the same people over and over again. Some people get the urge to want to do things to others. Being on a ship, everyone knows each other, so they’re comfortable. They [are] comfortable enough to know that, ‘That person’s not going to tell on me’ or ‘That person’s not going to report me because we’re closer than that, and I got things on this person that if they tell, I’m going to tell.’”
— **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

SAPR/SHARP responder participants described how cases on ships are often unwanted sexual contact between male Service members as a result of games they play that involve unwanted touching. Among Service members, unwanted sexual contact on ships is characterized by phrases insinuating that sexual contact is not “gay” if it occurs on ships, which is known as “underway.”

“I learned about how on the ships there was this saying that, ‘it’s not gay if it’s underway.’ There were a couple cases of unconsented sexual contact occurring in male berthing. It’s dark so they can’t really see who the person is that did it. Apparently, it’s a game to just whip your penis out and put it on people’s shoulder and then the person who has it there just had to tolerate it or something. Contact like that happens a lot in the male enlisted berthing on the ships.”
— **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

With the various risks for sexual assault onboard ships, the reporting process is also unique to ships. SAPR/SHARP responder participants acknowledged that for cases occurring on ships, there are more fears of exposure if a victim makes a report due to the secluded environment. With potentially fewer reporting options onboard, it may be more difficult for victims to find someone who they will comfortably report to, and to feel confident that their confidentiality will be maintained.

“But to the downside to what he was saying, with the whole, restricted, unrestricted, is on a ship, you’re confined to certain areas. And he or she, might

go ape [explicit], and go after him. And there's not going to be anybody to protect that person at that point in time.” — Navy, Mid-Enlisted, Male

Other Locations for Risky Behavior

Although workplaces, military housing, barracks, and gyms were the primary locations listed by participants as areas of risky behavior, they also identified several other locations, such as dining areas, commissaries, event centers, pools, and schoolhouses as areas of risk.

On-Base Recreational Areas. Golf courses, bowling alleys, pools, beaches, exchanges, and officer clubs were mentioned by participants as other on-base sites where problematic behaviors can occur. Environments where alcohol use is normalized, such as exchanges and officer clubs, were regarded as having an increased risk for verbal harassment and unwanted touching. Golf courses, bowling alleys, and other recreational areas with alcohol readily available were labeled as having an increased risk for verbal harassment and unwanted touching as well.

“One of my other ones was bowling alleys or anywhere that is a place where you're supposed to have fun and can have a drink. Quite a bit of gawking, harassment, alcohol use. That can definitely lead to something bad.”

— **Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

“I also have listed down the events center. From being here for a while, I know that, unfortunately, the alcohol use does get out of hand there. And it's a long walk and I don't know if you guys have seen how it's lit that way, but it's a long walk back to their dorms. It's a long walk and there's lots of nooks and crannies all along the way. We can't march on the grass but there's nooks and crannies everywhere. And then the flight line, you can go out and around and you could run around the entire base, but there's trees, there's bushes, it's got a lot of cover to it which is nice on a hot day but there's several instances where sexual assault has happened out there, things like that.” — **Air Force, Junior Officer, Female**

Commissaries and Exchanges. Participants described the exchange or commissary as areas where verbal harassment and staring occur.

“I put the exchange and commissary as well, but it's more so that sometimes you get inappropriate comments from retirees.”

— **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Pools and Beaches. Pools and beaches were cited as sites of staring, verbal harassment, and unwanted touching.

“Just unwanted touching... Even outside the base, if you go to a pool, you in a swimsuit, people look and they want to touch and all types of things.”

— **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Schoolhouses. Participants discussed how schoolhouses could be environments for verbal harassment, unwanted touching, and staring because of the number of young people in one place as they learn to navigate a mixed-gender social environment. Some of these behaviors were attributed to a lack of knowledge on how to court other young Service members.

Dining Facilities. The close quarters and the number of people in the dining spaces can create potential for, at times, anonymous, unwanted touching.

“There's 200 people in there, and you're this close, like back to back. It kind of has that basic training feeling where you're sidestepping and you're shoulder to shoulder with people. Obviously in basic training, it's the same gender. But it can still be uncomfortable. Here it's so mixed. And then we have the different branches and older students. Sometimes there are tech sergeants or officers in there that can still go eat there. So, it's just such a very small space for so many people.” — **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Off-Base Recreational Areas. Hotels, bars, and clubs were described as popular off-base locations for Service members to congregate. Because of the lack of Service-enforced alcohol limits, participants described these areas as sites for behaviors prohibited on-base and outside of the norms of military service, particularly for young Service members. While having more activities available at an installation may mediate Service members turning to alcohol-related activities, SAPR/SHARP responder participants identified CONUS installations in areas with local alcohol and drug-related activities as an exception. Larger events that involve alcohol and drug use, such as music festivals, are places where Service members may engage in alcohol or drug use, thus, increasing the risk for sexual assault.

“In most training installations, when they get their weekend passes, they like to congregate around the hotels or the local bars because they get an overnight pass. That's where you'll see a predominance of abuse of alcohol with the trainee population because there's no one there to regulate, there's no one to check them. Even if they are of age or underage, as long as they don't bring it back on post, who would know?” — **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

“A lot of people from all over the world come out here for the music festivals. So you have Marines and Sailors who've never really been away from home, never went to a music festival in the desert, engaging with people from all over the world and so they're maybe encountering alcohol and drugs for the first time in that manner too.” — **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Some participants described predatory behaviors by civilians at bars immediately off-base. Participants noted that in some cases, wearing a uniform can make you a target to predators. Participants described traveling in groups or with a battle buddy or wingman as a protective practice.

“I personally witnessed a male Marine that I brought out to a bar, just hanging out, get come up on by some [explicit], and she was like, ‘Hey, let me buy you drinks.’ It was the end of the night and I was getting everybody waters so that we

would all be good at the end of the night and she just kept putting drinks down on his table... She'd come back and I was like, 'Hey, are you going to be okay to drive ma'am?' And she was like, 'Oh yeah, I've been drinking waters all night. This is my second Corona.' A predator."

— **Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female**

SAPR/SHARP responder participants said they feel that younger Service members are less likely to have plans for their safety when they go off-base. SAPR/SHARP responders noted that in some cases, a battle buddy or wingman became distracted or left their companion behind.

"Now you're an Airmen and you're seeing the Air Force as a circle of something that you can trust, that will protect you. Then within the Air Force, you get your own circle of trust, which are your wingmen. And then you go out with them and you find out you're either betrayed by that wingman, that wingman did it to you, or they left you, or they did not watch, or whatever it was. And now, homie feels betrayed by that circle of your inner trust. You feel betrayed by the complete circle, which is the Air Force, like 'Wait a minute. I thought this was not supposed to happen because they told me people in the Air Force go by these values.' And then I hang out with these friends, and we had our own same values that we felt, cool people. It's almost a double betrayal on top of that, and I think one of the things, probably my opinion, betrayal from another person, losing that trust or whatever, it's a huge thing to deal with."

— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Suggestions for Mitigating Risky Behavior on Installations

Participants were asked to identify potential ways in which risky behaviors could be mitigated at the locations they identified during the mapping activity.

A frequent suggestion was to increase physical security and patrols of the barracks in order to ensure the safety of Service members. A lack of physical security or a lack of engagement of security staff were cited by participants as enabling prohibited and harmful behaviors. Security cameras were also noted as nonfunctional by some participants. Other participants said they feel that duty is often understaffed for the number of buildings they are expected to patrol. At times, participants described duties as disengaged or as having a conflict of interest in reporting; even so, participants who had been assigned to duty said that they could make a positive safety impact around the barracks when properly staffed.

"The barracks' duty system here is flawed. We have 60 duties for seven units... There's no way that those two people that are going to be on duty are going to see things that are happening in seven units' worth of barracks. Like any other place in the Marine Corp, they're going to be in one building, they're going to be within earshot of the situation. That is a first huge step that we can take that can change that system." — **Marine Corps, Senior Enlisted**

"In the barracks, you can definitely see when a girl doesn't want it. And you can definitely see when a guy's like, 'Oh I'm going to take her to her room.' And

when I'm a duty and I see it, I'm like, 'No, I'll walk her to her room.' Unless she's got a friend with her and she's got her, then that's the only way I'm going to let you walk up to her bedroom with nobody else in there."

— **Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Some participants proposed allowing younger Service members to live outside of the barracks in order to provide them with more of a work–life balance, and thus, decrease the need to engage in risky behaviors. Participants noted that when trying to fit in with a new peer group, particularly the new group they live with, younger Service members may be responding to pressure to drink or party as frequently as they do. Participants suggested that removing the dorm-like living situation may help some Service members separate themselves from the party culture and protect themselves from risky behaviors.

"I feel like most of those guys, if they had like an apartment or someplace to go home to be able to decompress and not feel like they need to go party. And I mean they just have a place to be. Like even if you have your own barracks room, as soon as you walk out of your room, there are a million people watching you and you're trying to go do laundry and it's, everybody's watching you. You have no place to just be." — **Navy, Junior Officer, Female**

"If we entrust a Sailor, a Marine, and a Soldier at 18-years-old to go overseas with a rifle and go to war, we should entrust them to go live out in town, correct?" — **Navy, Junior Officer, Female**

Chapter 4:

Sexual Assault Prevention and Response

The Department of Defense (DoD) has continued to support ongoing efforts to prevent sexual assault and sexual harassment in the military. The focus groups explored topics regarding the role of leadership, the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR)/Sexual Harassment/Assault Response & Prevention (SHARP) offices, training, and bystander intervention to assess prevention efforts and the manner in which they resonate with Service members.

Prevention

Focus group participants reiterated the importance of effective preventative measures to stop sexual assault from occurring. They were asked to share their opinions on the role of their unit- and Service-level leadership and on the SAPR/SHARP offices' prevention efforts, particularly with regard to providing training and resources to Service members. Participants were asked to share their experiences in participating in sexual assault prevention training and to identify training experiences that they found most powerful. In addition, participants were also asked to share why they think a Service member may choose, or choose not, to intervene in risky behavior occurring on-base.

Perceived Role of Unit Leadership

It is imperative to explore the role leadership plays in preventing and responding to sexual assault and sexual harassment in the military. During the focus group sessions, participants were asked about leadership's efforts around the prevention of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Although participants were free to discuss their perceptions of their unit leadership, past leadership, or Service-wide leadership, many participants discussed their direct experience with unit- and mid-level leadership. In the following sections, leadership level is distinguished wherever possible, when the context made it clear. Service member participants identified key areas where leadership is doing well and areas where leadership's efforts can improve. Service members' perceptions varied across Services, ranks, and commands.

Participant Satisfaction with Leadership's Role in Prevention Efforts

During the focus group sessions, Service members were asked what leadership does well when handling issues related to sexual assault and sexual harassment. Several Service member participants spoke highly about their leadership's prevention efforts.

Many participants acknowledged that the overall military culture is slowly shifting in the "right" direction to better prevent and address sexual assault and sexual harassment with the support of their leadership. They pointed out that leadership across their Service seems bought in and is actively making an effort to address these issues, whereas they perceived past leadership to either be slow to act or to have ignored the prevalence of sexual assault and sexual harassment entirely. Participants noted the recent progress from leadership to put forth an effort to openly talk about and combat issues related to gender relations.

“I will say the Air Force has come a long way though because I remember when sexual harassment wasn't even really a conversation. I was sexually harassed at my first base... And I had no idea how to deal with it because I didn't feel like there was anything that I could do to really address the situation...”

— **Air Force, Junior Officer, Female**

“I think recently, maybe not in the past, but recently the Marine Corps has really made a strong effort to make sure they educate the leadership and the Marines on exactly how to handle situations like that, and how to best care for the victim.”

— **Marine Corps, Senior Enlisted**

“Coming from our previous command, I also believe that they would have taken sexual assault or sexual harassment cases very seriously. I also acknowledge the fact sexual assault cases in the Marine Corps are usually handled by different people, because they happen in different commands, different locations. But I also see a very high willingness as far as the Marine Corps, to promote improving. There are classes all the time, and it's a common thing that is talked about.” — **Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Male**

Participants across ranks expressed that their leaders are currently addressing and responding to issues related to sexual assault and sexual harassment as soon as they arise. These participants reported, for example, that their leadership takes initiative to communicate to the entire unit that particular behaviors are not tolerated.

“I think as far as preventing sexual harassment or at least responding quickly to it, I think the Air Force has done a pretty good job of that, especially in COs. We squashed that [explicit] right off the bat. We don't tolerate that.”

— **Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Male**

“From my perspective, I see the Air Force as trying very hard to create changes within the culture of the Air Force. Especially from when I joined, almost 16 years ago, till now to try to, you know, create training, introducing awareness programs and different things, to raise people's understanding of what is sexual assault, how does it affect people, and also creating new programs to help support those that have been impacted by sexual assaults and to make people aware of what helping agencies are available on-base, off-base, across the DoD, in local communities, to help support them or the people they know when they're impacted by sexual assaults.” — **Air Force, Junior Officer, Male**

Not only did participants note that their leadership is addressing issues quickly, participants mentioned that leaders are proactive in addressing issues. Participants noted that leadership provides many approaches to Service members such as numerous trainings and access to resources. Participants described various leadership-led trainings, including seminars and all-hands calls, as part of leadership's proactive approaches to address sexual assault and sexual harassment. Participants praised leadership on the time and work they have put into prevention trainings.

“We get a lot of training, and I mean a lot of training. And if anybody disagrees with that, I mean we can look at all the NKO’s [i.e., Navy Knowledge Online] and PowerPoints we’ve had to do and whether you do them or not is on you. Plus, we also have the seminars every year you have to go to for SAPR. I think the education is there and the Navy can’t be everywhere and every time, shore patrol and whatnot..., I mean nobody’s perfect, but I think they definitely try.”

— **Navy, Mid-Enlisted, Male**

“I think over the last few years, the Navy’s taken a big step toward sexual assault prevention. And it’s every time you turn around, we’re having to do some type of All Hands Call, face-to-face trainings. They do SAPR Awareness Months, and while it may not be 100% effective I think the effort that they are putting into it, and the amount of time, money, and training I think they’re pushing it as hard as they can.” — **Navy, Senior Enlisted**

Perceived Areas of Improvement

Service members identified areas where they believe leadership can improve their handling of issues related to sexual assault and sexual harassment. The following sections will provide an overview of key themes regarding Service members’ perceptions of leadership’s current handling of issues and victim support, as well as how Service members believe leadership can improve in these areas.

Perceptions of Leadership’s Approach to Prevention. Despite some focus group participants acknowledging their leadership’s positive efforts around prevention, some participants still said they believe their leaders are ineffective in their approach to preventing sexual assault and/or sexual harassment.

“I think the effort for a lot of the COs and the sergeant majors, or sergeants major, and your leadership, shop heads, that type of stuff, they’re all invested in the Marines. They mostly want what’s best for their Marines. And so, in my case and a lot of the cases that I see, people are putting forth a large effort, it’s just that the effectiveness of the effort is sometimes a little shaky.”

—**Marine Corps, Senior Enlisted**

Some Service members noted that leadership, as well as the provided trainings, typically focus on male Service members as the offenders and female Service members as the victims. They noted that many trainings are female victim oriented and perpetuate the stigma that male Service members are always the perpetrators and never the victims. This way of thinking could affect male Service members and their willingness to come forward if they experience a sexual assault.

“A lot of people talk about how many female [Service members] get assaulted, but more male [Service members] on this base get assaulted on a daily basis than female [Service members] do. It’s one-a-day for male [Service members] because of the grunt barracks. Men are [explicit] each other and they’re raping each other and that’s so [explicit] up and nobody wants to talk about that. And they feel underrepresented because in the Step Up training, all there is is this

female [Service member's] getting assaulted at a party and no male [Service members] are being talked about at all."

—**Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female**

This negative stigma could also have a large effect on how leaders treat and interact with Service members. Participants noted that male leaders are more lenient on female Service members when it comes to addressing negative behaviors than they are when addressing the same behaviors exhibited by male Service members. Focus group participants said that many male Service members feel that sexual harassment and gender discrimination are inequitably enforced, and that male Service members are held to a higher standard of behavior. For example, they shared that men are punished or reprimanded for offering to help female peers, whereas women are able to catcall one another without repercussion. They posited that this leads to a negative working environment and poor morale for male Service members who feel they are discriminated against.

"There are times where women can do things and say things to other women or to men, that if I did it? I'm the bad guy. But if a woman did it, it's okay."

—**Air Force, Junior Officer, Male**

"I feel like it is heavily pressed upon the male gender to be in compliance with those regulations. And I feel as though in our culture it is not looked at enough about [female Service members] and being the aggressors and heavily weighing on that in our culture. Sorry, but especially if you have male leadership, they tend to look the other way when it is a female [perpetrator] and they tend to just ignore it. It could be completely outright, explicit and they tend to ignore it more." — **Air Force, Senior Enlisted**

Many active duty Service members in the focus groups viewed leadership as having a "mission-first" mentality, which can contribute to the neglect of prevention efforts. Some participants noted that leaders sometimes tolerate bad or wrong behavior of some personnel who are critical to their unit. Some participants shared their experiences in which some leaders tolerate or look the other way at low-level sexual harassment behaviors all together.

"[Mission-first mentality is] having no understanding of individual needs or what your Airmen are going through and driving everything has to be perfect. And if you mess up even once, then you're ostracized, and the mission matters more than people. And it really should be people first because if you take care of the people, the mission's going to happen." — **Junior Officer, Female, Air Force**

"Someone literally got raped in a fan room, and they're the one being extricated off the ship, the person who got raped. Rather than the other person, because, 'Oh, the other person is more mission oriented.'"

— **Junior Enlisted, Male, Navy**

Many male and female participants expressed that their leadership has had more of a reactive approach versus a proactive approach to sexual assault and sexual harassment. They noted that

leadership primarily takes action once a sexual assault or sexual harassment incident occurs or is publicized rather than taking action to prevent sexual assault and sexual harassment from happening in the first place. Simultaneously, some participants in leadership positions agreed that they are trained more so on how to respond to sexual assault rather than trained in what steps to take to prevent it. Participants noted that leadership should focus more of their efforts on proactive prevention in order to combat sexual assault and sexual harassment instead of focusing solely on response.

“I think it’s a program more developed on how to respond to it and be reactionary. As opposed to being a program that’s reactive, and how we, and how are you conducting yourselves in order to prevent these kinds of things. Now we have done bystanders intervention, but most of the time I see SAPR training, it’s ‘How do you report? Who do you report to? And what that reporting process is.’ And to me that’s reactionary, it’s not being proactive.”

— **Navy, Senior Enlisted**

A key theme that emerged from multiple sessions was that when it comes to prevention efforts, many participants said they perceive leadership as just “checking the box,” or completing a training requirement just to say it is completed. Both male and female participants noted that their leadership does not necessarily care about the issues, but rather, SAPR/SHARP training is just another task on their leadership’s list of things they are required to do. Participants noted that the perceived lack of caring from leadership can lead to victims feeling that they will not be taken seriously if they report an incident. Leaders are role models for their units. If they do not take a training or prevention effort seriously, their subordinates are unlikely to do so either.

“I think since I’ve been here, I’ve probably taken like six classes. And I think the intent behind the class is well, they’re trying really hard, but... a few of the classes I’ve gone to, it’s the mentality of, ‘Oh, here we go again. I’m just checking a box.’ I literally had someone say, ‘This is what I have to say. These are my points.’ Like they didn’t want to get off topic. They had a time of 20 minutes. That’s how long this class is going to take. We’ll get you in, we’ll get you out.”

— **Air Force, Junior Enlisted, Female**

“If they have that attitude, it’s being conveyed to everybody else that they work with, that’s their attitude on it and it’s just like, okay, obviously you guys don’t care. And if you don’t care, your other people aren’t going to care.”

— **Air Force, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Perception of Leadership’s Approach to Victims. During the focus group sessions, a central theme that emerged in the groups was the need for leadership to not only support sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention trainings, but to also support victims and improve victim care and recovery within their units. Many participants expressed their concern that some leaders care more about their own career than supporting victims.

“Let’s just say, you have a victim, you get the victim the proper support, so on and so forth. On the other side, what is working against that is, the commander’s discretion when it comes down to his or her own personal bias, or emotion. And

that is a major problem because you have entirely too many commanders that are essentially looking at their careers versus looking at the Marines, to make sure that your Marines are okay.” — Marine Corps, Mid-Enlisted, Male

Participants further noted a perceived lack of confidentiality in leadership’s approach to ongoing cases. This can prevent victims from feeling comfortable addressing situations with their leadership.

Perceived Areas of Improvement. For leadership to improve their prevention efforts, first leadership needs to understand, and demonstrate to their unit(s) that sexual assault and sexual harassment are a real issue.

Participants noted that leadership should be more visibly active and engaged when it comes to preventing sexual assault and sexual harassment in their units and at their installation. Service members emphasized the importance for leaders to be explicit with their command on acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. However, many participants shared their perception that leaders do not themselves know what behaviors constitute as acceptable. Participants proposed that all levels of leadership should be trained on what behaviors are considered acceptable and unacceptable. This would provide leaders with the background to effectively identify these behaviors in their unit and respond accordingly.

“Active and engaged leaders are absolutely critical to mitigating sexual harassment, sexual assault. Active[ly] engaged. It doesn't mean that leaders are in the back of the room on their cell phone as training is going on, but they are actively engaged, and people are clear on what the policy is with each commander.” — Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder

“I think empowerment is huge. Like if a CO or a leader were to talk about this stuff a lot, and set the line like, ‘I’m not okay with this. I’m not okay with this.’ Like the sharing of explicit imagery, I don’t know when the last time my CO talked about that. But if that were to be discussed, and say, ‘Hey, if this happens, these are going to be the consequences, and I empower all of you to make sure that this doesn’t happen,’ that hopefully will trickle down, just dribble down the totem pole. I think if people are empowered, and they know someone will have their back, they’re more likely to say something.” — Navy, Junior Officer, Female

Many participants noted negative views toward leadership’s current approach to sexual assault and sexual harassment trainings. Participants proposed ways in which leadership can improve their approach to training in order to become more effective. A few key areas to improve trainings included demonstrating that they care about the content they are presenting, holding small group discussion-based trainings rather than large briefing lectures, using real-world scenarios as examples to engage Service members, holding trainings on a more regular or continuous basis, and making prevention a regular part of safety messaging.

During the focus group sessions, participants expressed mixed views as to whether their leadership is currently enforcing a zero-tolerance policy regarding inappropriate behaviors. Some participants indicated leaders do not enforce punishment equally across all ranks. When

leadership does not enforce zero tolerance, it sends a message that these types of behaviors are acceptable, are acceptable in certain situations, and/or will be overlooked by leadership. In these instances, perpetrators are given little to no incentive to curb inappropriate behaviors.

“I think that they allow a little bit of tolerance for the higher-ups as opposed to officers [and] enlisted, and I think that it needs to be straight across the board. Anything like that is proven, then you're out.” — **Air Force, Mid Enlisted, Male**

“I think one of the other big issues is the consequence of being chartered and or convicted of sexual assault. Sexual harassment is not the same across the board. People that are more [repentant] for their actions are likely to get a lower punishment... And I think whether you feel bad about it or don't feel bad about it or whatever it was, you still committed the same crime and in the real world, outside of the military, that action has the same consequence regardless. I think in the military there's a lot of gray area where it just depends on how much you're liked, whether or not you're going to get away with it or what the penalty is going to be for that action.” — **Navy, Junior Officers, Female**

“It's like they say, ‘Oh, sexual assault isn't tolerated.’ But then you have people who get charged with it and they're still here and to me it's like a joke. It's basically saying [to] the victim, like, ‘Well, okay, I'm sorry for you, but this man he still deserves to have a job. He still deserves to be here.’ It's like a laugh in the face honestly. It's like a slap in the face too, I guess.”
— **Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Service member participants reiterated the importance of leaders demonstrating that they care about their unit and that they care about the content of the trainings. Participants noted that they and their peers notice the difference between leaders who are sincere and those who approach sexual assault and sexual harassment trainings as a requirement. Participants described sincere leaders as those who take the time to engage Service members on an individual level and put forth genuine effort into the presentations they are tasked with. Leaders who treat sexual harassment training as a requirement were viewed as showing little interest in the topic, giving monotonous presentations with minimal participation.

“There are definitely things in place and some Marines, a lot of Marines take it even if they complain. The leadership that has influence directly on Marines, I feel like overall I don't think they take it to heart enough. So, there are a few that care a whole lot and you can tell in their presentations that they care more about the subject that they're educating on. There are some that are doing it because, ‘Hey Marines, this is a check in the box.’ This is, ‘We're doing this every year. This is the only reason why we're doing it.’ They don't care enough about the reason behind the cause. I think they are well intentioned, but I don't think the delivery is there, yet.” — **Marine Corps, Mid-Enlisted, Female**

“The reason being is I see a lot of the videos that talk about, ‘Hey, this is what it is. This is how we can stay in front of it.’ The thing is I don't see it in a day-to-day. We see it in our annual trainings, kind of the requirement that we got to

check off. But where I would like to see it is people actually calling each other out for stuff that influences the culture of that. Like being okay with people saying really derogative things towards men or women in that case and be like, 'Hey, let's keep that out of the workplace.' I haven't seen that."

— **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Female**

When asked how leadership can improve, some focus group participants stated the importance of leading by example. Participants noted the difficulty within their unit when leaders do not set the tone and stick by it. This is consistent with prior research; leaders who lead by example, create a more cohesive unit (Yaffe & Kark, 2011).

"I think at our community, just my perception, it's really with the CO. He really pushes the fact that we are a family. Not a command, we're a family and we take care of each other. When you instill that mentality, okay, well you don't do things like that to family. It's not a direct message, but I think it plays a roll."

— **Navy, Senior Enlisted**

Perceptions of the SAPR/SHARP Program

The DoD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) is responsible for the oversight of the DoD's sexual assault policies and works in accordance with the Services develop and implement sexual assault prevention and response programs. Each Service directs its own programs and policies, and as a result, these programs go by different naming conventions. In the Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force, this program is referred to as Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR), whereas the Army's program is called Sexual Harassment/Assault Response & Prevention program (SHARP). This section provides an overview of focus group participants' perceptions regarding what aspects of SAPR/SHARP programs work well, perceptions of SAPR/SHARP responders, and areas in which the programs might be improved.

Positive Perceptions of SAPR/SHARP Programs

Participants were asked about the role of SAPR/SHARP and how these programs can be improved across Services. Given the range of participants' experiences, perceptions of these programs were mixed. Overall, participants acknowledged that SAPR/SHARP is a necessary program that could be improved and better utilized, but also noted SAPR/SHARP is more effective when compared to other prevention programs (e.g., suicide and alcohol prevention programs, equal opportunity programs).

"I think it's actually amazing and a good program, honestly. To actually help people who are victims and who are probably experiencing it and who have problems coming out about their issues and getting the medical attention. I think that's amazing. The program should stay." — **Army, Junior Enlisted, Female**

"I think probably the strongest one is SAPR. Out of all the programs that we do the prevention for, I think the one that's been... The one that actually works or

has been stopped the most or improved the most and that you continuously evaluate the most is probably the SAPR one.” — Air Force, Senior Enlisted

Resource Awareness. Participants reported that the SAPR/SHARP programs have grown a lot over the years, and Service members were more aware of the SAPR/SHARP resources that are available to them. Some participants noted that their installation has done a particularly effective job of informing Service members by posting posters and pictures of SAPR/SHARP officers/Unit Victim Advocates (UVA). This media helps lend to the perception that SAPR/SHARP responders are approachable when Service members are in need. Even so, some Service members shared that they felt differently, and although the resources were perceived as effective, they felt the majority of resources go underused due to a lack of awareness about the program.

“But [I] also feel like Soldiers do not use what is given to them. All the different avenues that you have to go about things, people don't use them. I'm an MP, just for everyone out there, so go with much of the cases on this base involving sexual assault and harassment. If people would just use their avenues that are provided, it would be a lot less than it ends up being in the long run.”

— **Army, Junior Enlisted, Male**

One specific program that was viewed as being effective addresses the barrier of awareness. One participant shared that some Navy commands have an app that they can download with information for Service members regarding the difference between restricted and unrestricted reports, as well as the names and contact information of their victim advocates. However, it was noted that this is implemented at the command level as opposed to a Service-wide app.

“One thing that the command's done really well is they've got an app out. On the app it's a flight schedule, and on the app it's got all this useful information. One of those things is a link, the two different types of reports, all the victim advocates... That is one thing that the command's done very well that made the program better. It's probably not Navy directed, but it's just something that command's done, in my opinion, very well.” — Navy, Junior Officer, Male

Improved Trainings. In addition to Service member participants sharing that they are more aware of prevention programs, they also shared their perception that trainings have come a long way over the years. Participants noted that prevention trainings have become more diverse in not only the content that is addressed, but also more varied in the tools used to present that information. Previous trainings emphasized prevention as a binary issue across sexes (i.e., men are perpetrators and women are victims); however, more trainings are starting to address assault as not just a female issue. Participants further noted that instructors are presenting information in a variety of modalities to make trainings more engaging for participants by using videos, case studies, and role plays. Participants shared that some programs even have a designated SAPR/SHARP day or special month dedicated to sexual assault awareness.

“And that is to not focus on the distinction between genders because it's not a female problem and it's not a male problem. You have issues on both sides and

really you alienate one gender when you make it one's problem and you turn one gender into the victim and one the perpetrator. Just continuing to and I saw it, I want to say a couple of years ago, they started coming out with like talking through basically like case studies, but they started including [male Service members] in those case studies as victims, which I think was really, really important.” — Navy, Junior Officer, Female

“They do a lot of scenario-based situations, video-based situations. It's really limitless when it comes to the instructor. They have all these tools that they're provided and they can take it anywhere. PowerPoint, video, out in a field, go hike and talk about it, scenario-based, get people to act it out, give scripts. It [has] come such a long way.” — Marine Corps, Mid Enlisted, Male

Barriers to Engaging with SAPR/SHARP Responders

Despite advancements in prevention and response, many participants noted that there are still opportunities for improvement. Participants were asked about how SAPR/SHARP responders are perceived and how staff can be made more effective. Although participants provided positive feedback regarding SAPR/SHARP responders, some participants indicated feeling that there are barriers to engaging with staff. Feedback from participants highlighted that SAPR/SHARP responders may have too many collateral duties to be effective in their role as a SAPR/SHARP responder to sexual assault. Victim advocates were seen as often wearing “too many hats,” and the extra collateral duties can spread staff too thin. Instead, participants suggested that victim advocates should be offered their own specialty/career field, particularly for individuals passionate about the program and skilled in serving their peers in need.

Further, participants expressed fears over confidentiality. Victim advocates who volunteer for the extra billet on their Non-Commissioned Officer Evaluation Report (NCOER) or who have reputations for gossiping will be perceived as less trustworthy. Participants noted that advocates should either be better screened for their positions or victims should have the option to speak with the staff member of their choosing.

“I know specifically if anything were to ever happen to me, the last person I would go to is SAPR because I just know in my immediate command it's very much like that high school and that confidentiality is not there. At all.”

— Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female

“I think they need to look at the leadership portion of selecting individuals, and actually having qualified and quality-driven individuals placed in those positions, so that we can have them placed at the unit level. And they are actually knowing the Soldiers and getting in there and solving some of the problems that are being brought to them. I feel that will be a good way to start with it.”

— Army, Mid Enlisted, Female

Participants recommended integrating more civilians into the SAPR/SHARP programs. In their experience, civilians seemed to have more bandwidth, seemed to provide more modern trainings, were perceived as safer confidants when reporting sensitive cases, and offered an outside perspective less susceptible to politics.

“My wife, in her unit, happens to be one of the reps, and unfortunately, her unit had, while training, they had an incident to a young lady who just came into the military, fresh out of boot. And she was attacked. But the good old boys’ club came into effect and she was moved. And basically, no punishment happened. I think it should be an outside entity, someone who is not part of the family. They can remove themselves from the situation.” — **Navy, Mid Enlisted, Male**

“I do love that our program is a civilian program, where we have civilians in place, because I do find that a lot of the victims feel more comfortable with that. Sometimes they do still get the support from the uniformed victim advocates as well, in the unit and stuff, and they know who they are, but sometimes they feel comfortable when they come to a civilian... especially with the restricted cases and with the higher ranking sometimes.”

— **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Other participants indicated that having more diverse SAPR/SHARP responders would increase reporting behaviors. The majority of staff in these positions tend to be female, so having mandates on diverging staff demographics may make staff more approachable to male victims.

“In my unit, we have seven UVAs, and it's a mixture of four females and three males, all different types of demographics. We did that on purpose just to make sure that, if someone has an issue, they have someone they can at least physically relate to as far as they might have the same upbringing as me, same background. That works a lot.” — **Marine Corps, Senior Enlisted**

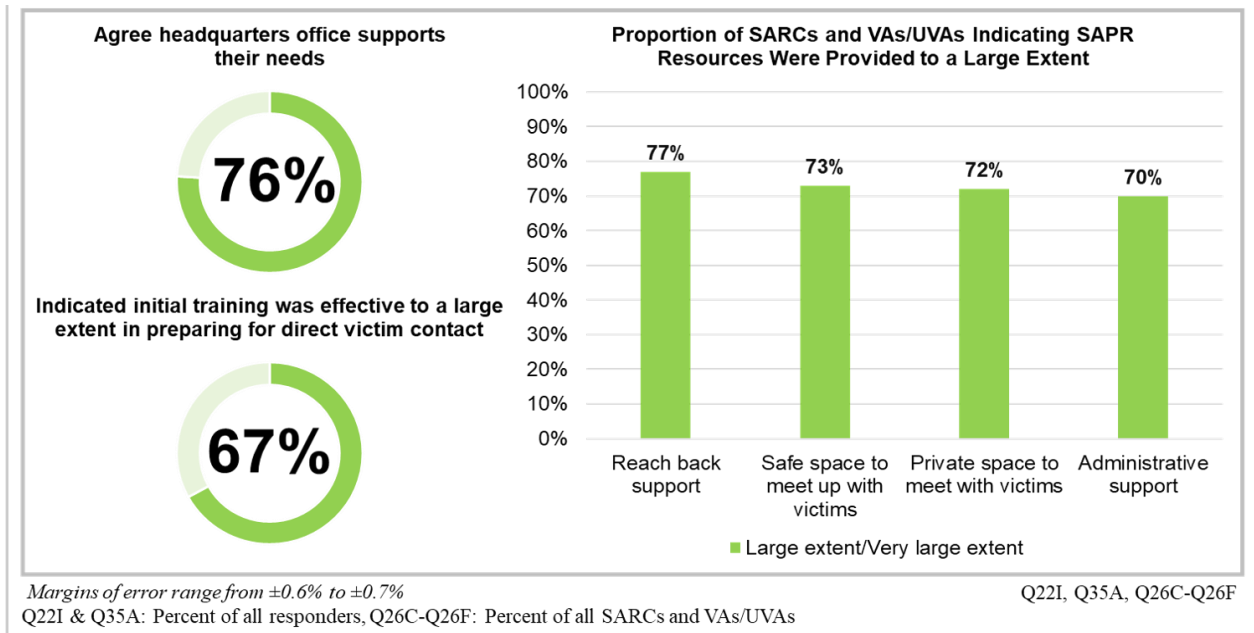
Feedback from SAPR/SHARP Responders

Feedback from SAPR/SHARP participants expanded on barriers identified by Service member participants. SAPR/SHARP responder participants acknowledged that there are areas for improvement in their programs, such as a lack of necessary resources, a need for more standardized programs, more support for current SAPR/SHARP responders, and inconsistent pay across Services. SAPR/SHARP responder participants also noted that leadership could improve conditions by soliciting and responding to feedback from SAPR/SHARP responders. Participants pointed out that SAPR/SHARP responders are very knowledgeable about how to incorporate better training content and methodology and should receive more autonomy to integrate more modern approaches.

“We mentioned, consistently, changes that need to be seen. But then, they want this big scope written out and all of this. We're just plain people. It's like talking from one person, they're way up here, and come on. Just talk to us. Let us present this.” — **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Results from the 2018 *Quickcompass of Sexual Assault Responders (2018 QSAR) Overview Report* (see Figure 7) generally demonstrate that SAPR/SHARP responders have positive perceptions of the support they receive, resources available for victims, and initial trainings they received in their role. However, discussions among SAPR/SHARP responder participants provided nuanced perspectives on areas where improvements could still be made.

Figure 7.
Responder Group Perceptions of SAPR/SHARP Support for their Role



More Standardized Resource Allocation. SAPR/SHARP responder participants called out that a major barrier is the lack of a standardized resource allocation across Services. Participants noted that their offices are required to complete a plethora of responsibilities; however, they lack the resources provided to other programs. For instance, one participant brought up that SAPR/SHARP often uses other department’s administrative staff instead of having its own in-house administrative team. Other participants expressed funding as a prominent obstacle and wished each Service received consistent funding and guidelines.

“I think for me, I would like to see the program standardized across the board, not just for Army.” — **Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

“That is a hindrance, that all branches are getting different guidelines for funding, for structure, even nomenclature. If you have a DoD policy that even goes into DoDI, it’s crazy how different practices, standard operating procedures, deviate; and how many holes there are.”
— **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

In addition to standardized funding, SAPR/SHARP responder participants noted that budget cutbacks do not reinforce that they are a valued organization. Some participants said they feel

that the lack of funding for staff and innovative trainings is a result of the military approaching SAPR/SHARP programs as more of a box to be checked by Congress.

“What's amazing to me anyways is that we hear our leadership, the extreme leaders, very high leadership talk about how important this subject is. They say that in front of Congress and DA [i.e., Department of Army]. They're all testifying saying, ‘Okay, we know how important this is.’ But that's up against the fact that they're cutting positions, which is mind boggling. How can they say it's so important, and then at every opportunity, at least opportunities that we know in this room right here, that they try to cut positions, take away positions? That doesn't make sense to me.” — **Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Perceptions of SAPR/SHARP Programming

Although some participants noted that SAPR/SHARP initiatives are visible on their installation, other participants shared that Service members at their installation lack awareness about these programs. In addition to some participants sharing that they do not know how or where to access their victim advocates, many suggested that the larger problem is that they do not have enough training on the reporting process and that sexual assault is approached as reactionary instead of from a prevention perspective. A majority of victims wait too long to file a report or are confused about the implications of an unrestricted versus a restricted report. Addressing these gaps in training will increase Service members’ understanding of reporting, and subsequently, the use of these resources.

“I was a UVA for three plus years, and a unit that had not reported a case in four years, and as soon as I got there and the unit got educated, guess what? Seven cases in probably the first six months. Not all of them happened at the same time, but it's just the education piece that doesn't happen, and if the unit doesn't know, and the good part is the teaching.” — **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Male**

Participants suggested another gap that should be addressed by SAPR/SHARP programs is for SAPR/SHARP trainings to focus more on male victims of sexual assault. Although women are statistically more likely to be assaulted than men, the large male population of the military means that, even with lower rates of sexual assault against men, there are also not insignificant numbers of male victims. Participants asserted that trainings are starting to move in this direction, but participants proposed that more emphasis on male-to-male and female-to-male assaults would foster greater awareness and reporting of these incidents. Focus group participants posited this may be particularly important as male Service members may feel more stigma in reporting and less comfortable reporting cases to other male Service members.

“Talking about gender before, it's not just we all think male and female, but really start to push more it can be male on male, female to female, female on male, and it's just something that really isn't talked about.” — **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Female**

Despite comments that reporting is a topic frequently covered in trainings, confusion remains surrounding the reporting process. Given that many SAPR/SHARP representatives are spread across responsibilities, some participants reported difficulties contacting their advocates. Participants suggested having a more anonymous way to report cases (e.g., app, online forum) may ameliorate barriers and increase reporting. Additionally, participants indicated the biggest confusion surrounds the difference between a restricted and unrestricted report. Participants suggested further that providing more online resources to mitigate these barriers and addressing this confusion in trainings would be advantageous.

“It's like, you can go to this person and it could be restricted, you go to this person and it's unrestricted... That's confusing as [explicit], I think for younger people. If they just want to report something, they should be able to report it to whoever they want.” — **Navy, Senior Enlisted**

Bystander Intervention

Service members were asked about the role of bystander intervention in the context of preventing sexual assault and sexual harassment from occurring. Discussions centered around what factors empower Service members to intervene when they witness risky behavior and what factors are perceived barriers to intervening.

General Perceptions of Bystander Intervention

Shifting the onus of responsibility away from individuals to third-party bystanders has been well received by many Service members. The 2018 WGRA found that most Service members (70% of men, 77% of women) who witnessed inappropriate behavior in the last year intervened either during or after the event (OPA, 2019b). A majority of Service member focus group participants voiced that prevention is everybody's responsibility and that intervention is engendered through personal convictions, creating an environment that encourages members to be called out for their actions, and emerging generational differences. Others cited pervasive barriers that continue to impede intervention, including fear of social and career consequences, personal connections with parties involved, and a lack of training on how to intervene. Prior focus group efforts involving active duty participants (e.g., OPA, 2018a, DMDC, 2016) and Service Academy participants (e.g., OPA, 2018b) cited similar barriers to bystander intervention, demonstrating a consistent presence of these obstacles. Participants discussed how DoD sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention efforts have started to shift toward how the Department as a whole can prevent incidents through third-party interventions. This collectivistic perspective may be especially important when considering power dynamics and barriers to intervening.

“The conversation has shifted. And that's what I truly appreciate, that it's not so much emphasis on the individual preventing it. It's more about the bystander.”
— **Air Force, Junior Officer, Female**

“We're in a system that it's very hard for young people to speak up against someone who's more senior and especially if they're significantly senior to them

because that can just cause other problems for them. Bystander intervention is huge and encouraging people on how to do it appropriately and with respect.”
— **Navy, Junior Officer, Female**

Facilitators to Intervening

Although the majority of participants agreed that intervention in sexual assault and sexual harassment is everybody’s responsibility, Service members listed numerous factors that contribute to the likelihood of intervening. Participants indicated that new trainings emphasizing bystander intervention, camaraderie in units, personal morals, relation to parties involved, not being the only person intervening, education about punishment for collateral offenses, and having an environment where people are called out for their actions all facilitate increased bystander intervention.

“[At] my command, you would be dead if any of these things were out in the open. I mean, very protective command. I have no problem. I know I’d have back up as well. At least in my command, I do believe that there would be intervention and, actually, I know there was one at one point for an off-base incident that someone intervened.” — **Navy, Junior Officer, Female**

Effective Trainings. Participants noted that trainings emphasizing the importance of bystander intervention have been an effective strategy in encouraging Service members to intervene when they witness sexual assault, sexual harassment, or other risky behaviors. Participants discussed how these trainings empower Service members and have especially impacted younger Service members. Some noted that they perceive that younger Service members may be more likely to intervene in certain contexts than others who may have been in the Service longer.

“Speaking as an old Soldier, we were never taught to intervene, back as a little Soldier. These new Soldiers are taught that. And coming from that generation, we weren’t going to talk anyway.” — **Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

“I think this day and age, more Marines are willing to step in. I know probably late 90s, early 2000s, Marines would just turn around. Not all of them, but you know. Because the training wasn’t there.” — **Marine Corps, Senior Enlisted**

Personal Convictions. Service members in the focus groups noted that intervention can largely be mediated by personal differences and morals, leading some individuals to be more likely to intervene. For example, participants expressed that individuals who are naturally extroverted will be more likely to speak up. Although some individuals may worry that they are being the “bad guy” if they speak up, others may determine it is their moral responsibility to speak up and say something even if it leads to confrontation. Other participants noted that, similar to earlier discussions on family and background influencing Service members, personal upbringing plays a large role in the decision to intervene.

“It depends on the Service member. If you are very outspoken and you’re out there and you don’t care, it’s easy. For me it’s pretty easy because if I think

something's wrong morally, I'll let someone know and I'll explain why. And I try to get through them. If I can't, I did my best. But other people see it and will shy away because they don't like confrontation and they don't want to be the bad guy.” — Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female

*“Some people are raised different. Some people think differently. Someone might see that and, ‘I don't want to get involved but I'm going to look the other way,’ where somebody [else is], ‘I'm going to take action. That doesn't look right.’”
— Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Male*

Relation to Parties Involved. Participants indicated that their relationship with the parties involved influences their decision to intervene. Although participants said that if they know the parties, they may be more aware if inappropriate behavior is occurring, others indicated it would be easier to get involved if the parties involved were obviously strangers to one another. Moreover, participants said they feel more comfortable intervening if they are not the only person stepping into a situation. However, there was not a consensus on when one would feel comfortable intervening in situations when there are other individuals intervening as well.

“I feel like some people already know, like you see them together when they are sober or something. When they're drunk and they're leaving with that person or they're doing certain things with that person, then it's like, ‘Okay well they're already involved with them.’ But if they're completely strangers then that's when I'll probably intervene. But strangers, it's like if I've seen seeing them walking by themselves and leaving by themselves and I don't know them or leaving with someone... and I don't know them, I'll quickly intervene, because I've seen that happen.” — Army, Junior Enlisted, Female

“I'd say they're more likely to intervene and do stuff if they're in a group. Alone, individual, not so much. But if they're out with their buddies, more likely to like, ‘Hey, what's going on over there?’” — Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Male

Barriers to Intervening

Participants were also asked about potential barriers to intervening. Proposed barriers ranged from the desire to fit in with colleagues, fear over ramifications in their personal and professional lives, how closely they know the parties involved, and uncertainties over how to intervene in such situations.

Lack of Training. Participants also expressed there is uncertainty about how to successfully intervene in problematic situations, and there are gray areas for when and how to intervene in certain situations. For instance, participants were unsure if they should step into situations in which the parties involved have had a preexisting relationship. Participants also noted that when they have wanted to step in, they were not sure how to act or what to say. Providing engaging training content on how bystanders can be most successful may help Service members more confidently intervene when they see an issue.

“The people who do care who are actually brave, they're either misinformed or under informed. I also notice the programs focuses a lot on how people can avoid being sexually assaulted and the resources that you can get to when they are. But there's nothing saying about like what bystanders can do to see signs beforehand or how basically to just tell people don't do it. Just telling people these are the signs and like showing that it's actually like a power issue versus an actual sexual desire.” — Air Force, Junior Enlisted, Female

Fear of Intervention. Several focus group participants noted that fear has prevented individuals from intervening, including a fear of actually getting involved and getting injured in the process. Most participants alluded that their fear stems from intervening in situations involving higher ranking individuals. Participants stressed the importance of bystander intervention but noted that many people outside of the military do not understand the consequences of reporting someone of higher rank. While a situation may seem to have an easy decision to intervene, participants remarked the involvement of a higher-ranking Service member results in hesitation because of the culture surrounding hierarchal rank structures.

“I think it really depends on the Service member because everybody says I would absolutely do something, but sometimes you feel like, ‘Oh, it might be really bad if I do something. I don't know if I want to interject because it could put myself in danger, so I guess it would just have to depend on the situation.’ It depends on the ranks involved too. You'd have to be pretty bold to be an Airman and jump in if [inaudible] is doing something that's not okay.”
— Air Force, Junior Officer, Female

Professional Consequences. Similarly, many participants cited that there could be professional consequences if they intervened. They indicated that there could be a lot of risks if they intervened, such as being blamed for the incident or not being supported in the same capacity as the victim and alleged perpetrators. For students, there are fears that if they intervene in situations, they risk becoming too involved in the incident, such as being named as a witness, and delaying their training to the point where they are not able to graduate on time. Some members noted that although they morally want to intervene, the risks often outweigh their moral convictions, and they do not want to enter a situation in which leadership will ultimately step in anyway.

“I used to be the [bystander] intervention person, and I am no longer that person. And I say that because, unfortunately, Air Force doesn't take care of those people. So, having seen it almost first hand where a person steps in, tries to help this person, gets hit with fraternization, gets hit with all these charges for seeing a person in a club drunk and trying to drag him out.... I'm not going to jeopardize my career to try to save someone, which is totally against my actual character, because my actual character definitely got hit in the face at a club for stopping a domestic incident. I don't mind getting injured, I don't mind getting hurt, which sucks because that jeopardizes my career, and it's like I have to choose because I got to eat.” — Air Force, Junior Officer, Female

Social Desirability. Although not mentioned as frequently as other barriers, participants recognized that there is a social desirability component to deciding to intervene in sexual assault and sexual harassment cases. Participants acknowledged that choosing to intervene could make them look like a snitch and lead to being ostracized for their actions, especially for what are considered more lower-level behaviors (e.g., gawking over someone at the gym).

“I think the gawking is a little bit more, I think people definitely aren't comfortable enough stepping in to correct that, primarily because we are in a male dominated world and male dominated club. A lot of the times it's up to the [male Service members] to step in and be like, ‘Hey, man, stop staring.’ Most of the time they are not going to do that.” — **Marine Corps, Mid Enlisted, Female**

Training

Participants across pay grades noted that they participate in ample training opportunities; however, many also noted that training is not always engaging or particularly effective in curbing problematic behaviors. Participants were eager to provide suggestions for adjusting training methods to ensure training is engaging and stimulates conversation. They further noted that based on their own experiences, addressing gaps in the content delivered could better support their peers in understanding what behavior is inappropriate.

Suggestions for Improving Training Methods

Some participants raised the importance of team building exercises, role play, and sexual assault prevention stand-downs, and emphasized the importance of demonstrating diverse experiences (i.e., sexual assault is not always male on female). Participants also noted the importance of regular conversations and briefings regarding sexual assault prevention and other safety-related topics, rather than only holding large-group annual trainings. Other key themes that emerged from discussions are summarized below.

“I do think the weekend spiel that we get every week, just saying, ‘Be safe, have a plan,’ and all that. It's repetitive, but it still puts that little tick in your head to think about the choices you make. If you need somebody, they're there for you.” — **Navy, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Trainings Should Be Engaging, Especially for Junior Service Members. Focus group participants said that they receive too many trainings that are overly reliant on PowerPoint slides and do little to engage Service members. Participants said that trainings feel like a “check in the box” in order for a unit to meet training requirements, and Service members are visibly bored by redundant presentations. Participants pointed out that redundant trainings and rote presentations minimize the importance of the issue and facilitate joking about the content.

“It almost feels like you're getting SHARP training like every other week. Where generally the instructors just reading off a slide. It becomes really a boring kind of tedious check the box kind of training, instead of just as [another participant], was saying, an actual heartfelt conversation.” — **Army, Junior Officer, Male**

“They just do the same thing over and over again. It's really repetitive. You just hear the same spiel every time.” — Army, Junior Enlisted, Male

Participants noted the importance of engaging with Service members on their level with real language and encouraging meaningful discussion on difficult topics. Younger Service members respond to clear definitions and examples of appropriate or inappropriate behavior. Participants emphasized the importance of trainers and subject matter experts being approachable and using language that all participants can understand and relate to. SAPR/SHARP responder participants reported that Service members seem more engaged in conversation and sexual assault prevention briefings when they are encouraged to ask questions without judgment. Other participants shared positive training experiences in which presenters and/or commanders set up picnics or movie nights to create an engaging environment for conversation and morale building.

“I can sit down in front of the students and they can engage with me, and I've got a room full of 18-, 19-, 20-year-old kids and, for me, it works because they're just like, ‘Wow, NCIS [i.e., Naval Criminal Investigative Service] agent.’ They've all seen the TV show and that's what I tell them, ‘This is your one and only opportunity, unless you're in an interrogation room, to speak one-on-one with one of us and ask whatever it is you want to ask. You're not going to get in trouble for asking us questions,’ and they love it.”

— Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder

“We've done it before though, and just like an elementary school field day, but a Marine Corps field day. We just go out and play kickball and grill some burgers and stuff, and have different stations that people go to, to check all the boxes. Those are way more interactive and way better than what you're used to in all the other commands where it's death by PowerPoint all day, to also hit all the checks in the boxes.” — Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Male

Participants emphasized the importance of a quality facilitator to engage Service members in difficult conversations. Focus group participants said that civilian experts are often perceived to be attention-grabbing and knowledgeable presenters who are respected by Service members across ranks. Participants proposed that pairing civilian experts with engaging presenters from their Service branch may be a more effective method of engaging Service members than simply providing PowerPoint slides and talking points.

“She's very passionate when she talks about her, you know that subject and she'll put up a PowerPoint, but she's walking through the room just, she's on fire. And I just think it has more of an impact than some other person or the skipper standing up in front of the command droning on about sexual assault. I think having someone that is well versed in the subject and has the best idea of what the answers to those questions [are] is far more effective.”

— Navy, Junior Officer, Female

Participants further proposed that small group discussions or conversations are more effective in engaging Service members than larger presentations or lectures delivered to an entire unit or

installation. Participants noted that, although content is important, the opportunity for discussion is the most helpful component in training opportunities, as this allows Service members to learn from their peers' experiences and to ask questions to clarify their understanding of what language and/or behavior is inappropriate.

"We had one class that I think we went 40 minutes over our time limit. The conversation was amazing, the people were doing great. There were stories shared. I got back to my office and it was, 'Where have you been? That class timer is only supposed to take 20 minutes,' and they literally were going to write up the person who did it because they took longer than they were supposed to. And I was like, that is ridiculous. I even explained to them, I was like, 'We were sharing personal stories.' Like it was a thing because this is very organic class that happened and now they're in trouble because we went over our allotted 20 minutes." — Air Force, Junior Enlisted, Female

Trainings Should Make Sexual Assault Relatable and Personal. Participants noted how important it is for their peers to understand that sexual assault can happen to anyone and that this is a real issue to be taken seriously. Participants across Services relayed positive experiences with actors portraying skits and scenarios, using these skits to jump-start discussion with Service members afterward. Focus group participants recalled that their peers were engaged and interested in these skits, particularly because they were well done and so different than the previously delivered standard trainings.

"We had the theater group come to our squadron... early on this year, and it was uncomfortable. The direct conversations that they were having sparked additional conversation, but they talked about some things that a lot of people were real hesitant to discuss, but they forced you to have that dialog... The dialog is what is important about it, and being okay to talk about it, even when you're uncomfortable." — Air Force, Junior Officer, Female

"I got more out of the skit, more than the PowerPoints. They really were able to have the signs that both people are affected... The skit can change a lot easier than the PowerPoint. The PowerPoints go through a lot of hoops and stuff like that to get changed. It's not [inaudible] always changes it. For the skit you can change it fairly easily... You get some session by session things." — Army, Junior Enlisted, Male

Participants also noted that although it would likely be difficult for victims, Service members may find it helpful to hear from someone like them who has experienced a sexual assault. Others proposed that hearing from perpetrators may help Service members consider the "gray area" that they may find themselves in. SAPR/SHARP responder participants pointed out that many perpetrators' stories do not sound "villainous" at all; rather, some perpetrators misunderstood a situation and proceeded to act inappropriately. They reiterated the importance of encouraging Service members to consider their behavior and to think through their actions before they find themselves in the wrong.

“One thing that I liked about the SAPR brief, was they played a video of specific women reading a story, a rape, basically a case of sexual assault. And in that video, it turns out that these stories were men, just kind of touching on the idea that yes, men are also victims of sexual assault, and rape. In regard to gender, I'd say that they're really trying to branch out and get away from the stereotypes that it's only men that are the offenders, and it's only women that are the victims.”

— **Air Force, Junior Enlisted, Male**

Participants noted that videos can also be effective in stimulating conversation and portraying realistic scenarios to Service members. A well-done video diminishes the possibility that the message will be lost due to a poorly done training. In addition, participants pointed out that with the rise of social media, videos are often more attention-grabbing for younger Service members than a lecturer with PowerPoint slides.

“But if you go back to the video aspect of it, they get to actually see from beginning to end certain issues and situations that maybe precede sexual assault or sexual harassment. And then it goes to the ‘Hey, these are steps you can take to report it.’ Now we're just like he said, report, report, report. But it's not, ‘Hey this is considered sexual assault, this is considered sexual harassment.’ And they're actually seeing it play out. Versus someone telling you, ‘Hey, this is what this is.’ And they're not seeing it, so they're, ‘Uh, maybe this is assault, maybe this is harassment.’ ... With the video's they were shown the process.”

— **Navy, Senior Enlisted**

Female participants reiterated the importance of male and female Service members discussing different and shared experiences with one another. They noted that it is important to ensure that Service members understand what sexual assault and sexual harassment really look like across scenarios and situations. They also emphasized the importance of the shared discussion, noting that although it can feel good to talk to others of their gender, sharing their experiences across gender groups can be more helpful for their peers to understand experiences, both different and shared.

“Because even [men], things happen to them and girls are like, ‘How did that even happen? That makes no sense. You're a guy.’ It goes both ways. I don't think that we give each other enough credit and we don't listen to each other enough. It's [women] against [men] and [men] against [women]. And we're not united.” — **Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female**

“I think that if we get to the younger Soldiers first, the young [male Service members], because they get harassed, too, in these units, and the younger [female Service members] and really tell them, ‘This is what it looks like when somebody is trying to sexually harass you.’” — **Army, Mid-Enlisted, Female**

Suggestions for Improving Training Topics

Several focus group participants proposed that gaps in the training materials should be addressed. Participants suggested that future trainings should address rank and power dynamics, provide more information about existing SAPR/SHARP resources, and address sexual assault misperceptions, such as the false reporting rate, by providing trainees with up-to-date statistics on preventing sexual assault.

“And she asked them, ‘What do you think the percentage of actual false rape allegations are?’ And these guys are saying 80%, 70%. She’s like, ‘No, it’s only like 1-8%.’ And then she told them her experience and all that and they kind of learned from that.” — **Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Participants also recommended that Service members receive training on participating in healthy relationships. SAPR/SHARP responder participants identified unclear communication and a misunderstanding of boundaries as prominent characteristics of cases they have experienced, especially in cases involving younger Service members. Because of this, SAPR/SHARP responder participants recommended implementing more trainings and conversations on what a healthy relationship entails and how to communicate expectations and boundaries within a relationship. Furthermore, SAPR/SHARP responder participants noted that incorporating information into trainings about access to resources about domestic violence would also be beneficial.

“Seem like a lot of its coming down to plain healthy relationships and boundaries. I mean a lot of these young individuals, when you say healthy relationship, they think about boyfriend and girlfriend, husband and wife, not understanding that if you are my friend, we’re in a relationship, there’s boundaries that I shouldn’t cross and if you tell me no, that’s no. And a lot of them don’t understand what a healthy relationship is and what boundaries are and they just push it to the limit until something happens and they’re like, ‘I didn’t know I couldn’t do that.’” — **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Provide Ongoing Bystander Intervention Training. Some participants noted that they participated in bystander intervention training early during initial military educational training; however, they noted this is a distinct gap in annual SAPR/SHARP trainings that Service members receive. Participants noted that bystander intervention is one important method of prevention in a sea of, otherwise, reactionary responses.

“In a separate video about sexual assault, they outlined the different roles people play and one of them is the bystander, which is someone who sees something wrong but they don’t say anything. So we’re aware of it, but to me there hasn’t been a formal training where it’s like, ‘These are some things you can say or these are some things you can do to resolve this situation or how you handle the situation.’ It’s more so in the trainings we have had you kind of just have to pick up on what they’re doing right and what they did wrong and just adjust accordingly.” — **Army, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Female participants, in particular, noted that Service members may want to act to support or defend their peers; however, they may not know how to intervene or how to intervene in different situations. Example scenarios that participants described included intervening when someone of a higher rank is acting inappropriately, or situations in which they are just not sure whether behavior is unwelcome or not. They reiterated the importance of training that provides real examples, role play, and varied circumstances in ensuring that Service members feel confident in intervening in a risky situation.

“The training teaches us that you don't have to just interject yourself. You can distract, you can cause the diversion. It's not just like going up and like breaking up a fight. It can be a multitude of different things.”

— **Army, Mid-Enlisted, Female**

“My question I always have at SAPR training is like, ‘Hey you're both men. You're living together. What do you do if your roommate cops a feel?’ You don't talk about that. How do I get my guys to think about that in that situation? ... Do we let them have that experience of, ‘Hey that guy's doing something bad. I feel like I should do something but I don't know what that looks like. What are the words I should say?’ ‘Hey man, that's not cool,’ or, ‘That's totally not jammin' with what the Marine Corps' doing.’” — **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Female**

Participants suggested, as with other trainings, that providing real case examples, personal experiences, or relatable examples may help spur more Service members to action. They reiterated that Service members need to first be able to recognize inappropriate behavior and situations, and secondly, they need to have practiced the language and actions to feel comfortable intervening. They pointed out that PowerPoint slides are just not as effective to these ends as discussion, role plays, and videos. Hearing from other Service members further helps them understand the importance of stepping in and supporting their peers.

“I think if someone would be willing to come up and tell their story, someone that Marines can relate, ‘That person's a Marine, that person could have been my Marine, my leader, my peer,’ I think that could [be] impactful.”

— **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Female**

Emphasize Alcohol Education. Participants noted that although it is impractical and unlikely that alcohol can be removed from areas of risk, Service members should receive education on how to drink safely. Participants recommended that training should include knowing your limits when consuming alcohol. Because, as previously mentioned, ride-sharing apps remove the need for a designated driver, SAPR/SHARP responder participants recommended incorporating training on designating a sober friend.

“Alcohol seems to be a bigger issue, and now with Lyft and Uber, there's no need for a designated sober friend, so you're going out now where everyone's drinking to excess. I don't know if there's a good way to combat that, but I think we're actually probably going to see an increase in these reports of sexual assault where both parties are drinking.” — **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

“It's meant to be punitive almost sometimes, but taking like an alcohol class, like understanding your limits. I think it was last year, maybe the year prior, they did a really strong push for like the 0013 or whatever it was. But there was nothing further than just putting up the flyer and posting it all over. They didn't do an alcohol education class, like, how to consume alcohol in a smart way. Because it's not always bad, and sometimes a beer a day can be good for your body if you're breastfeeding or different things like that. Or red wine is good for your heart. Different things like that. A lot of people don't know that. They just drink to excess, and I think education on alcohol, and alcoholism, and knowing your limits.” — Army, Mid-Enlisted, Female

Participants noted that policies focusing on the number of drinks imbibed are not practical and belie the root of the issue. They pointed out that educating young Service members on responsible drinking is akin to educating them on how to act responsibly in other aspects of their duty and lives.

“We're very reactive, and I think a lot of our programs are very good on the reactive side, once something happens. Trying to prevent it, which is much more challenging because it's not like somebody comes in the Marine Corp and just decides, ‘Hey, I'm going to become an alcoholic, or I'm going to start sexually harassing people.’” — Marine Corps, Senior Enlisted

Trainings on Sexual Harassment Should Address The Gray Areas. Senior enlisted and junior officer female participants highlighted the need to provide training and education to Service members about recognizing sexual harassment. As noted in Chapter 3, many focus group participants had a difficult time defining sexual harassment. Participants noted that trainings are beginning to educate Service members to trust their perception of a situation.

“But sexual harassment, you get a lot more gray area. It's perception. ... I think that's the hard part. I would definitely say harassment [training] is less successful than assault because of the ambiguity of the definition.”
— Army, Senior Enlisted

“You go to any infantry unit and the sheer lack of [female Service members] is going to change the perception of what is sexual assault. When I was with an infantry unit, grab-[explicit] games and gay chicken and all that stuff, we didn't have anyone else to play with but other guys. We were just going to make it as uncomfortable for the other guys as possible. But you take that same 0311 [i.e., Infantry Rifleman] and now you've put them into S1 [i.e., a staff position] or an IPAC [i.e., Installation Personnel Administration Center, an administrative office], and he's trying to play those games with the other guys around him, that is now socially unacceptable behavior.” — Marine Corps, Mid-Enlisted, Male

Participants shared examples from their workplaces, and proposed that recognizing sexual harassment can seem obvious, despite it being difficult to define. They suggested that having a

clear definition with which to educate others may also alleviate false reporting in addition to helping Service members recognize and call out sexual harassment.

“Now that we’ve moved away from PowerPoint, a lot of times people are hesitant to give blanket statements outright, because every situation is different. If somebody asked a question, it’s, ‘Well, but what if?’ The ‘what if’ situation. Most often when I’ve gotten trainings or we’ve done discussions, I feel like Sailors walk out of there not really getting their question answered on what is truly acceptable and what isn’t.” — **Navy, Junior Officer, Female**

Trainings Should Address Consent. Focus group participants across groups noted that they do not receive training on consent the way they receive trainings on other topics.

“You’ll hear more about ‘Don’t drink and drive,’ ‘safe sex,’ but nothing about no means no, or consent, or anything like that.”
— **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Female**

“And I think that one thing that needs to be done is that there should be more conversations about consent and what that looks like, and that it’s not just yes, touch me, no, [don’t] touch me.” — **Army, Junior Officer, Female**

Participants noted that confusion about consent persists despite Service members receiving multiple and annual SAPR/SHARP trainings. Participants recognized that in trainings, lesson plans and training materials are very “black and white” regarding acceptable behavior; however, trainees require more substantive examples and discussion to properly equip them for navigating real-world situations.

“SAPR training puts everything in black and white, but life is just different shades of gray. You put everything as it’s either this or that, you’re like ‘Okay, everything I’ve done falls in between both things, so what is it?’ There’s always a bunch of confusion going on, especially at the junior entry level when they’re still 18-, 19-years-old. They don’t get all these different concepts about sex and consent.” — **Marine Corps, Senior Enlisted**

SAPR/SHARP responder participants noted they often hear and address the misperception or misunderstanding in victim interviews that drinking alcohol negates the ability to consent. According to focus group participants, this can lead some Service members to report an assault based solely on that misperception. SAPR/SHARP responder participants noted they are having to educate Service members after the fact, rather than having a clear understanding from training.

“It’s happened in victim interviews, and [the victim] said, ‘Well I had alcohol and I was taught that if I drink I can’t consent.’ And I’m saying sorry on the back end again. Again, I’m not discounting what happened but that’s not in the law. Just saying you had alcohol.” — **Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

“I think it contradicts itself on things when you’re getting the instructor level, specifically they say, ‘You cannot give consent if you’ve had any alcohol. Consent

cannot be given.’ When we’re teaching the junior Marines, ‘Can you have sex after drinking?’ ‘Yeah, but you just said you cannot have consent, so there’s no consent, and in order to have sex, you have to have consent.’ That directly contradicts itself.” — Marine Corps, Senior Enlisted

Preventative Trainings Might Be Combined. SAPR/SHARP responder participants saw parallels between SAPR/SHARP trainings and trainings to prevent suicide or drug and alcohol abuse. They noted that the recommended preventative actions are often similar, if not the same. Participants noted that trainings are often common sense or, essentially, “Adulting 101.” Consolidating training may allow for additional small group discussions and help Service members be more well-rounded and better prepared to intervene in risky behaviors.

“Sexual harassment, sexual assault, drug and alcohol prevention, suicide prevention. Because they all go together in some sort of fashion, or possibly could go together. So why not get together with those people who represent those organizations, come together and have some sort of joint training?”
— Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder

One participant noted that he found the Air Force Green Dot training to be helpful in providing techniques for Airmen who may not know how to confront a peer:

“So Green Dot’s basically trying to emphasize all the younger guys and everybody coming up that it’s good to speak up. Here’s some different ways, techniques you can use to speak up when you see something because everybody can see it. It’s not just the two people at fault... It gives good techniques for people that don’t know how to confront or respond to confrontation. There’s different techniques that it offers which I believe is helpful.”
— Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Male

Other participants highlighted the Suicide Prevention Resource Center’s (SPRC) Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) and Suicide Alertness for Everyone (safeTALK) trainings for suicide prevention. Focus group participants said these trainings use expert trainers, create safe places for discussion, and incorporate peer-to-peer experience sharing to make the topic relatable for all participants.

Specialized and Additional Training for SAPR/SHARP Responders. Participants suggested that SAPR/SHARP responders, legal staff, and leaders involved in cases receive additional and/or specialized training in order to better equip them to effectively support victims of sexual assault through the reporting process and legal proceedings. Results from the 2018 QSAR found that only 38% of SAPR/SHARP responders and legal personnel feel that their initial training on court-martial processes was effective to a large extent, corroborating sentiments that there is a need to improve this area of training for SAPR/SHARP responders (OPA, 2019a). Some respondents proposed SAPR/SHARP responders receive legal training to help victims navigate and to better prepare for the reporting process.

“They're required to come to us for their questions. But when it's a 15-6 [i.e., administrative investigation], it doesn't happen like that. A 15-6 just happens. I think that anytime that's initiated pertaining to SHARP in any way, shape or form, that they [i.e., alleged offender(s)] have to come and get a refresher training...”

— **Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Reporting and Response

Service members who experience sexual assault are generally unlikely to report, though reporting rates have increased over the past decade (SAPRO, 2019). Of the estimated 20,473 Service members who experienced a sexual assault in fiscal year 2018, 6,676 filed a report of sexual assault (4,898 unrestricted reports and 1,778 restricted reports; OPA, 2019b, SAPRO, 2019). Participants provided insights into the reporting climate for Service members, expressing how reporting may differ based on workplace culture and age, as well as perceptions of false reporting. SAPR/SHARP responder participants were asked specifically about the differences between restricted reporting and unrestricted reporting, the role of leadership in reporting, the response system, and how the legal process of prosecuting cases of sexual assault impacts Service members.

Reporting Options

There are various types of reports a Service member can make to report sexual assault and sexual harassment, including different personnel with whom Service members may choose to file a restricted versus unrestricted report. Participants discussed the characteristics of restricted reports, unrestricted reports, and non-reporting, as well as the identified pertinent factors in deciding what type of report to file, if at all.

Restricted Reports

SAPR/SHARP responder participants explained that Service members may choose to file a restricted report in order to have their experience represented, while maintaining their privacy. SAPR/SHARP responder participants described the restricted report as something that can empower the victim, as it gives the victim the choice of how to confront the experience and allows the victim the choice to change from restricted to unrestricted if they choose to change later. Service members may also choose to file a restricted report in order to connect to resources without having to initiate an investigation.

“I think giving the person the choice to not to have to be subjected to the investigation and everyone knowing, and the possible blaming, and not wanting to be a trouble maker, being able to just go and just say it to us, and just to be able to take that first step in healing themselves is huge. Having that restricted option, I think gives them a little bit of power to take back control of their life.”

— **Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Participants also indicated that some Service members may turn to restricted reporting as a result of feeling as though it is their only option to avoid unwanted consequences.

Uncertainty in the Process. Generally, SAPR/SHARP responder participants indicated that there is a large amount of uncertainty concerning unrestricted reports and investigations, which draws Service members to file restricted reports. Service members are not always aware of what occurs with an unrestricted report and the investigation process. For example, participants said Service members who are involved in incidents that violate other military policies, such as underage drinking, turn to restricted reports in order to avoid collateral misconduct that they perceive would occur if they filed an unrestricted report. Restricted reports remove the uncertainty of the investigation process and allow Service members to have more perceived control over the events following their report.

“People going restricted on the basis that they’d rather go ahead and stay restricted and not get reprimanded for engaging in underage drinking, which they have heard they will typically get punished for later down the line. Sometimes not even later down the line.” — **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Fear of Retaliation and Lack of Anonymity. SAPR/SHARP responder participants also explained some Service members turn to restricted reporting due to fear of retaliation. Service members fear retaliation from the alleged offender, peers, or leadership if they file an unrestricted report and others become aware. This is particularly the case for incidents that occur in the workplace, where the victim may come into contact with their alleged offender more frequently. Similarly, victims may file a restricted report if they have a previously existing relationship with the alleged offender that would also cause the victim to continue to come into continued contact with the alleged offender.

“Restricted cases are usually situations that happened within the work center and they’re afraid.” — **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

“I see both kinds of reports, but the majority of them are people that they knew, Marines, Sailors, that they work with, battle buddy, they were friends, lived in the same barracks, so there was that trust there. And sometimes that’s leading to the restricted reporting because they are like, ‘No matter what I do, I’m going to have to see this person all the time.’” — **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Career Impact. SAPR/SHARP responder participants explained that Service members file restricted reports to avoid career impacts on themselves and the alleged offender. For students, there are fears of an unrestricted report and an investigation impacting their training and graduation. SAPR/SHARP responder participants also indicated that senior enlisted leaders and officers are more likely to file a restricted report rather than an unrestricted report. Participants indicated that because they are farther along in their careers than younger Service members, there could be greater career impacts if a senior leader were to file an unrestricted report. SAPR/SHARP responders noted there can be a level of toxic loyalty in which there is a continued consideration on the part of the victim to protect the career of the alleged offender. Toxic loyalty can be perpetuated by peers who engage in gossip and discuss the impacts on the alleged offender, bringing about feelings of guilt or shame for the victim.

“Sometimes a student may elect to file restricted through their training. Once they graduate and move on to their next duty assignment, they elect to make it

unrestricted because then they can really focus on their career without having any worries... I think that they don't want to miss any POI [i.e., program(s) of instruction] time or time away from sitting in the classroom that could put them behind in their academic standards and those sorts of things."

— **Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

"It's like 'Well, I don't want to report it because I don't want him to get in trouble. I don't think it's worth hurting his career over.' And we find out it's because people are constantly talking about stuff, not unintentionally affecting this person, but talking openly in the office spaces about, 'Yeah, you know so-and-so lost his career because he was accused of sexual assault...' And they feel guilty."

— **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

"It doesn't really matter because if X gets accused, sexual assault of any kind is the one crime where you're guilty until proven innocent."

— **Marine Corps, Junior Officer, Male**

Unrestricted Reports

SAPR/SHARP responder participants were asked about the circumstances that contribute to a Service member's decision to file an unrestricted report rather than a restricted report. Generally, SAPR/SHARP responder participants explained that Service members file an unrestricted report due to a sense of duty. They aim to have their alleged offender held accountable for their actions and to ensure their unwanted experience does not happen to anyone else.

"In looking at unrestricted [reports], whether it's a conversion or just a right out the door: 'I don't want this to happen to someone else.' That seems to be a huge motivation especially for the [male Service members] as well."

— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

"Normally restricted cases, after a while, they actually will go unrestricted. I've seen personally, a month or so of going through the process.... They start to trust you as the chain of commands not involved but start to trust the process and then they'll go unrestricted."

— **Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

SAPR/SHARP responder participants emphasized that a consequence of an unrestricted report is a lack of confidentiality. SAPR/SHARP responder participants explained that when a Service member files an unrestricted report, it is likely that members in their command will become aware that a report has been filed. This is attributed to the need to investigate the incident once the report has been filed in order to gather information and form a case. SAPR/SHARP responder participants recognized that knowledge of the report from the unrestricted process can result in reprisal and that the fear of reprisal has been identified as a reason for non-reporting among Service members.

"Part of that could be, when you go the unrestricted route, you're going to start interviewing people, you're going to start looking at who's a suspect, and a victim"

and you're going to start talking to the circumstances around the case and everything. So part of that, I think you could say from a reprisal standpoint at the command, well, 'This is my best Marine, and you're going to make an accusation against my best Marine,' and all of a sudden you feel like you're put off in a corner and isolated." — **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

"If you give an unrestricted report, a lot of people are going to find out, and not everyone wants everyone to know one of the worst moments of their life."
— **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Unfortunately, not all unrestricted reports are intentional on the part of the victim. SAPR/SHARP responder participants mentioned that there are accidental unrestricted reports by Service members who disclose their experience to someone who is required to report it. Unrestricted reports also occur when a third party is involved: If a Service member files a report on behalf of another Service member, an unrestricted report is created and an investigation takes place. SAPR/SHARP participants noted that, when an unrestricted report is filed by a 3rd party, victims do not feel they have any choice in reporting their experience.

"Some of the unrestricted [reports] have evolved from third party reports. It wasn't necessarily their desire for that to be made public to be investigated. It makes it very difficult as they're going through that journey because they don't really feel like, 'That was my choice.' In fact, if it would've just been restricted and got the help, they would be a little more comfortable."
— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

"We had a female military policy officer that was assaulted, sexually assaulted. All her friends are cops. So, you go tell your friend what happened, and you just told a mandatory reporter; they have to come tell. They're automatically limited on what their reporting requirement is."
— **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Choosing Not to Appear in SAPR/SHARP Office

SAPR/SHARP responder participants mentioned that rather than filing a report in person, Service members will choose to call the SAPR/SHARP office, primarily to maintain anonymity. In addition, some Service members call they want talk through an issue or experience without having to reveal any identifying information. SAPR/SHARP responder participants explained that this type of call may involve a Service member asking hypothetical questions in order to seek more information on what resources are available. However, SAPR/SHARP responder participants indicated that when Service members receive their resources through an anonymous call, they may not be motivated to make an official report due to the perception that they have already received what they need by calling the office.

"We get phone calls with scenarios, but we still give them the information and guidance and leave them at that. We'll guide you to the right place because we're

usually the only ones that have the restricted reporting options, and so we don't want them to lose that option until they want to lose that option."

— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

"I think there are people that if they think that they know their resources and perhaps had called... And they've done hypothetical and they're not ready to make an unrestricted report and they don't feel the need to necessarily make a restricted report because they know their resources then they might just not make a report at all." — **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Non-Reporting

Participants indicated that non-reporting occurs frequently and explained why Service members choose to not file a report. Participants identified reasons similar to why Service members file restricted reports, including a fear of retaliation, fear of career impact, collateral misconduct, and the victim experiencing feelings of shame or guilt.

"Who can we go to because, I'll be honest, I went up to the next step of leadership, and guess what they did? They went down to the former leadership, and guess who got in trouble? Me." — **Air Force, Junior Officer, Female**

SAPR/SHARP responder participants also expressed that Service members choose to not file a report for their unwanted experience because they do not want to deal with what comes after they file the report. The investigation process is perceived as difficult and lengthy for victims. Further considerations for the legal process's impact on victims are discussed in the *Legal Considerations and Criminal Justice* section later in this chapter.

"It goes both to male and female [victims]. I've seen that they don't want to report it because they don't want to go through all that stuff that they have to deal with, paperwork and going to NCIS and all this stuff." — **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

SAPR/SHARP responder participants noted that the way some victims are treated is a deterrent for other Service members to come forward. When Service members witness a lack of support for victims, retaliation toward other victims, and other negative impacts of the Service member filing a report, it prevents other Service members from wanting to come forward. Furthermore, participants acknowledged that it is not just the treatment of victims they witness in the military, but it is the treatment outside of the military and in the personal experiences of others they know that makes them not want to report an incident.

"I think a lot of our barriers that people don't report due to command climate and culture, and it's not just here. These youngsters are looking at the news, they see how sexual assault is being treated in the media, how people are being victim blamed, how the suspect or subject has no responsibility whatsoever when they've sexual assaulted somebody. They see all this, and I think there is a lot of

reluctance to come forward because they see how victims are being treated and they don't expect anything different."

— **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Participants identified how some messaging from leadership discourages reporting, a factor not discussed in previous active duty focus group efforts. SAPR/SHARP responder participants explained that leaders' emphasis on having low numbers of sexual assault negatively impacts Service members' decision to file a report. Service members do not want to contribute to rising numbers, and instead, they choose to not disclose their experiences. Furthermore, SAPR/SHARP responder participants described how some leaders make statements that sexual assault does not occur in their commands. These statements were also identified as a deterrent to reporting for Service members who experience sexual assault, as it is harmful to perceive their experience as negated.

"Because you put out to the crew, this isn't something we need, this isn't something we need to deal with and everything, what crew member is going to come forward and say I've been assaulted? My CO just said this doesn't happen to us. I mean, the message being relayed down the pipe through the crew is 'Who knows?'" — **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Although some Service members may choose not to report their unwanted experience, SAPR/SHARP responder participants explained that Service members will also appear in the SAPR/SHARP office just to talk and to gain insight into what the SAPR/SHARP office has to offer. Service members reach out to the SAPR/SHARP office to obtain information on resources and support, and the SAPR/SHARP responder participants mentioned that they encourage Service members to reach out to the SAPR/SHARP office in order to form a trust between SAPR/SHARP personnel and other Service members.

"Just gathering information, wanting to know 'Okay, are you really here to support me? Who's here to support me? What is the support that I can get?' Either that's what VLC, Victim Legal Counsel, Special Victims Counsel, they want to know if they are efficient, I think, to see what's out there. And then I either come back later or I don't come back later because I can handle it myself."

— **Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Reporting Climate

There are several attributes of the reporting climate for Service members that dictate general sentiments toward reporting, including various cultures that make a Service member more or less willing to report their experiences. Participants indicated that, typically, Service members try to, and are encouraged to, handle issues at the lowest level before bringing the issues up the chain of command. However, handling issues at the lower level may be taken to the extreme, with Service members choosing to handle sexual assault among themselves.

"Say something happened to one of my Marines. One of the other junior Marines should be able to stop it. And then if it keeps going higher, say it stops at a

sergeant. That's where it should stop. It shouldn't have to go up higher unless it needs to. But if the peers have the guts to stop it then there wouldn't be as many incidents.” — Marine Corps, Junior Enlisted, Female

Participants remarked that command climate has an impact on the reporting climate at installations and in their respective commands.

Participants noted that they and their peers sometimes perceive that leadership does not always escalate complaints and concerns when those complaints are not handled, or not able to be handled, at the lowest level of command. As noted in Chapter 3, participants suggested that this perceived inaction on the part of leaders is rooted in their leaders believing that some Service members are too sensitive and that some complaints are unnecessarily brought up the chain of command. Participants pointed out that this deference to handling complaints at the lowest level may lead to some Service members' concern that an incident they report may not be taken seriously or dealt with by leadership. Some participants suggested that Service members consider their perceptions of how sexual harassment or discrimination complaints are handled when they are making the decision to report a sexual assault and in what way. They note that leaders that demonstrate a lack of concern for lower level behaviors can create a negative reporting climate in their command.

“This one Sailor's uncomfortable and affected and upset... NCIS had a problem with it. How they drilled my Sailor was, ‘Do you think you were too sensitive about the situation?’ ... It's become an investigation, and you're trying to ask if she was oversensitive?” — Navy, Mid-Enlisted, Female

“I could mean the NSC [i.e., Naval Safety Center] climate, that specific battalion climate, I could mean even like battery or company level, what's that captain or First Sergeant like, and that can truly affect, again, if something's happened in the past six months, and it was brushed aside or it was made a mockery out or someone was making an example of, well, then that next person is certainly not going to make a unrestricted report knowing that they don't have that support..” — Marine Corps, SAPR/SHARP Responder

Participants also explained how inconsistent enforcement of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination rules undermines Service member faith in leadership. Inconsistent enforcement includes wavering leniency on punishments and the removal of rank. When leaders are perceived as not holding offenders accountable or as not taking all incidents and reports seriously, Service members lose faith in their leadership. Participants believed that inconsistent enforcement between officers and enlisted Service members is particularly prevalent and is a point of frustration for Service members.

“The fact of how much that we have to prove that a [Service member] is incompetent, or is underserving of a rank, or whatever the case may be, and then for a commander just to be like, ‘No, it's not enough.’ Or, ‘Oh, I see.’ No, that's not enough, like that's ridiculous. And that's where we lost a lot of Marines, and that's where it also trickles into reporting for this, that and the other.” — Marine Corps, Senior Enlisted

“I don't think they hold everybody accountable the same. I think they have double standards for those in higher positions. They don't hold the same standards to those who are in lower positions, and I don't think that's right or fair.”

— **Army, Mid-Enlisted, Female**

Outside of command climate, an important aspect of the reporting climate is the perceived level of confidentiality for reporting sexual assault. In general, participants explained that there is a lack of trust in the confidentiality of reporting and described instances in which other Service members became aware of a report made by a victim through gossip or the investigation process. This results in a lack of trust toward both leaders and SAPR/SHARP personnel, which creates negative impacts on the reporting climate and makes Service members unwilling to report if they experience sexual assault.

“I think there are people that just don't trust the military at all and [SAPR/SHARP responders] are an extension of that process. They just really don't trust that the information is not going to make it to their command.”

— **Army, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Along with the overarching factors that impact reporting climate for Service members, there are some pay grade differences that impact reporting as well. Some SAPR/SHARP responder participants said they believe that younger Service members may be more likely to report than older and more senior Service members due to the various differences in barriers and career impacts for senior Service members, which are perceived as more severe.

“But I think we also handle it differently because of our rank, as well. Hypothetically, I feel another chief has harassed me in some way, before I go and make a complaint, I'm going to talk to them. I'm going to address it with them. Is this something we can figure out? Because that could be career ending.”

— **Navy, Senior Enlisted**

In addition to the general factors that impact reporting climate, participants frequently spoke of the prevalence of false reporting. Prior years' focus groups revealed sentiments of male participants believing that false reports occur frequently and female participants disagreeing with that belief. However, both male and female participants across varying pay grades expressed this sentiment during the 2019 MSGR focus groups. Service members said they perceive that false reporting is prevalent and used as a tool for Service members to avoid punishment for other activities. Impacts of the perceptions of false reporting, particularly among commanders, are discussed in the *Legal Considerations and Criminal Justice* section later in this chapter.

“There's been so many false accusations, too, people just trying to ruin other people's lives with giving them false rape accusations, false sexual harassment accusations. I believe there should be, not necessarily a benefit of the doubt, but more like a devil's advocate that maybe that person is lying.”

— **Army, Junior Enlisted, Female**

Increasing Reporting

As noted in previous sections, focus group participants were mixed when it came to their perception of their peers' awareness of the SAPR/SHARP office. Many participants said they believe that there is a general lack of awareness of the procedures for reporting sexual assault among their peers. Although SAPR/SHARP responder participants said they perceive an increase in reporting, participants identified a variety of ways in which reporting could be better publicized, made easier, and made more appealing to Service members who experience sexual assault or sexual harassment.

Participants recommended that increasing visibility of the SAPR/SHARP office would make Service members more aware of the resources offered and how reporting works. Recommendations included implementing a SAPR/SHARP social in order to allow Service members the opportunity to become better acquainted with SAPR/SHARP personnel, placing visuals of the reporting procedures in more locations, and increasing the presence of victim advocates. Furthermore, SAPR/SHARP responder participants emphasized that victim advocates should work to build relationships with their coworkers and Service members, so Service members are aware of someone they can go to if they experience sexual assault. Additionally, since certain command climates may create environments that deter some Service members from reporting, participants said they believe that making it known that Service members can talk to a victim advocate outside of their command would also help increase reporting.

"I always try to encourage people to just build that relationship with their co-workers because it is a difficult conversation. As the SAPRO VA, you're the person that people can talk to, but if you're not someone they've ever spoken with before and they don't feel comfortable talking to you, it's not going to matter even if somebody has something to report." — **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

"I don't think they know that there are resources outside of their command that they could utilize The reality is, especially at a small command, most likely people are going to find out, but there are avenues for them to go to whether that's family. I think maybe promoting that your victim advocate is awesome, but if you don't want to talk to your victim advocate, you can go to the chaplain, you can go to other resources." — **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Complementary to increasing awareness and visibility of the SAPR/SHARP office is the need seen by participants to improve awareness of reporting procedures. Participants indicated struggling to understand who they can report to if they experience sexual assault or sexual harassment. As a result, participants recommended that the SAPR/SHARP office needs to clarify messaging on who is and is not a mandatory reporter. There is confusion, particularly among younger Service members, about whether people in their command are able to maintain confidentiality. Participants indicated this confusion has occasionally led to unwanted reports and has discouraged other Service members from reporting. Improving education on who a Service member can talk to and being able to control whether or not a report is made may improve reporting among Service members.

“I know one of the big ones was like when it went from, you could only tell one person that something happened, that you were sexually assaulted to you can tell whoever you want as long as they're not a required reporter, and it goes up the chain of command. Questions come up about that all the time, ‘Who can I tell and who can't I tell when it comes to this and still be able to keep it restricted or unrestricted or what is the process like?’ That information is a lot to dig through and there are a lot of ins and outs and, ‘Oh by the ways’ that a well-versed SARC has the answers to and can give a very well thought out by-the-book answer.”

— **Navy, Junior Officer, Female**

Previously discussed as barriers to reporting were the perceived tribulations of the reporting process and lack of confidentiality when reporting. Participants said they believe that making the overall reporting process easier for victims would increase reporting. With reservations of confidentiality as a prominent barrier to reporting, some participants indicated believing that implementing options for anonymous reporting would be helpful for Service members who want to disclose an experience but are fearful of members in their command finding out.

“I think more information needs to be put out about the anonymous side of it. Calling the hotline instead of relying on your command. Because yes, everyone was afraid to go to their command. I think in putting it more out there that there's somebody right now who has a phone that's a sexual advocate that's not from your command. And if they are from your command, they'll get you somebody else. That's the program. But a lot of people think it's just your command and you go and report it restricted.” — **Navy, Mid-Enlisted, Female**

Response and Consequences for Alleged Offenders

The response following a report of sexual assault or sexual harassment is important in setting the tone for victim support. SAPR/SHARP responders noted it is important to show Service members that if they choose to disclose their unwanted experience or another Service member's unwanted experience, they will obtain the support and resources they need, as well as have the alleged offender held accountable for their actions. Participants had mixed perceptions of response efforts after a report is filed. SAPR/SHARP responder participants expressed that victims are not always made to be the priority. Participants indicated perceiving that commanders can be a hindrance to victim support throughout the response process, sometimes choosing not to cooperate with SAPR/SHARP responders on their duties or on victim support.

“We're just trying to help people, so we might be great advocates, but then, we can't even make a step forward without taking 19 steps back. And the victim's the one that suffers basically. The victim is not the priority in the instruction or in anything.” — **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

When discussing consequences for alleged offenders following a report, participants indicated believing that not all alleged offenders are held equally accountable and that the chain of command needs to hold everyone accountable regardless of their rank or position. Participants described that Service members of a higher rank have privileges and are not held accountable the

same way Service members of a lower rank are. They said that all leaders, no matter the rank, should not be above the law.

“I feel like if maybe people saw more people being held accountable for what they were doing. Not saying it doesn't happen because there's plenty of things that are being done behind the scenes that not everyone gets to see, but if more people saw them being held accountable for what they were doing, they would understand how or why they shouldn't do, of following a path that someone else has done.”

— **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Participants identified that transferring the alleged offender to another command is a consequence that is frequently taken toward alleged offenders. Participants said they believe this action is ineffective and that it does not provide appropriate consequences for the alleged offender. Participants explained that it does not always alleviate victims from having to come into contact with their alleged offender, as the alleged offender is generally transferred within the same area. Participants also said that it is important for alleged offenders to be held accountable with harsher consequences rather than only transferring alleged offenders to different commands.

“I've seen people that were accused of certain things, that found out that they did it, and they were just moved to a different place. That prevents people from going to say other things because all they're going to do is go another place, so ‘Why am I doing it?’”

— **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Although most participants said they believe that there is not enough done to prosecute alleged offenders, some SAPR/SHARP responder participants explained that some leaders put too much emphasis on prosecuting alleged offenders. SAPR/SHARP responder participants indicated that an emphasis on prosecution means more strain on already limited manpower and resources, despite shortcomings in the evidence and an unlikelihood of conviction. As a result, cases take longer, are lost, or the victim chooses to no longer pursue action.

“We need to make sure that the services that are provided to the victim are not dependent on that prosecution. That's what I think they do that fails.”

— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

“While in the broader sense, I understand why [leaders emphasize prosecution], because you don't want command sweeping it under the rug. And it could be indicative of a bigger problem. I completely get that. I think their sweeping reactions to that was very shortsighted and created a situation, where we don't have the resourcing manpower. It's one size fits all. And I have no ability to just close down a simple case that is never going to go to prosecution.”

— **Navy, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Legal Considerations and Criminal Justice

When exploring aspects of the response system, SAPR/SHARP responder participants were asked about their experience with the legal process of cases for victims of sexual assault, and to

provide insights into some of the positive aspects and challenges they have experienced as SAPR/SHARP responders. Their experiences included discussions on how they handle the legal process and the impacts the criminal justice part has on victims and commands.

Considerations for Victims

Generally, SAPR/SHARP responder participants said that the legal system, as it currently stands, can be harmful to victims. SAPR/SHARP responder participants described that the criminal justice process largely caters to prosecuting the case and is not designed to bring closure to the victim. Instead, SAPR/SHARP responder participants said that the process of having a case tried and the possibility of the alleged offender not found guilty is emotionally harmful for victims.

“I’ve had a case where I fully believe that she was telling the truth, and a jury, a panel fully acquitted them. Then I have to look at her afterwards, bawling her eyes out and say, ‘I am sorry.’ ... I don’t know, you tell me if it’s better to take more cases to court and just raise the acquittal rate where at the end they’re now subjected to another level, a public level, a public hearing, and then being told by a five panel member of officers, ‘Hey, I don’t believe he sexually assaulted you.’”
— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

SAPR/SHARP responder participants also discussed how the outcome of cases can impact reporting. When cases do not result in a legal conclusion in line with the victim’s expectations, this information is spread among other Service members, and it discourages other Service members who experienced sexual assault to come forward and pursue the legal process. It becomes the perception that if another Service member were to come forward, they too may not have the desired outcome of their case.

“I think that a lot of times when things don’t go the way that a victim expects it to go when it comes to the legal process and that word gets out, a lot of people hear and see that stigma and don’t want to come forward. They feel from a legal standpoint it took all of this courage, it took me as a person to be able to talk to multiple people on multiple different levels to explain what happened to me, and multiple people are telling me that what I experienced is not what I experienced.”
— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

SAPR/SHARP Responder Experience

Throughout the criminal and legal process for cases of sexual assault, SAPR/SHARP responder participants remarked that they have conflicting thoughts of being able to perform their duties and going by mandated policies or being supportive of victims. Often times, SAPR/SHARP responder participants indicated having to tell victims that, under law, they cannot proceed in the legal process, because the experience does not meet the legal criteria for sexual assault. For victims, this can be harmful to hear when they disclose their experience, and it can be difficult for SAPR/SHARP responders to explain. SAPR/SHARP responder participants emphasized that they still demonstrate empathy and encourage resources for victims, despite having to explain that their case cannot move forward legally.

“And I’ve sat down with victims and said, ‘I empathize with you and I am not doubting in any way that you feel that you’ve been victimized and that you have been through something. But, under the law, what you are describing to me and all the facts and all the evidence that I have is that it’s not a sexual assault.’”

— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

SAPR/SHARP responder participants attributed the inability to move forward with cases with having to follow specific guidelines for cases. Legal personnel must be able to prove a specific intent or gratification beyond reasonable doubt in court. SAPR/SHARP responder participants identified that this task is particularly difficult and results in SAPR/SHARP responder participants choosing not to pursue legal cases further.

“From a support aspect, it’s really hard to support somebody and help to encourage growth and to deal with that, when, I’m sorry, but there is a long history of being in the military where sexual assault cases don’t make it to court martial because of the fact that intent can’t be proven.”

— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

Command Response

When the investigative process completes, the response from commanders can also impact victim and SAPR/SHARP responder experiences. Participants noted that commanders may be hesitant to punish alleged perpetrators if that person is a particularly good worker or is considered mission essential. SAPR/SHARP responder participants mentioned that if a case does not proceed with court, some commanders will incorrectly assume it is a false report. This perception is identified as harmful to victims, negatively impacting the ability of SAPR/SHARP responders to help victims feel safe and heal after their experiences.

“And one of the things I find happening is that for some of the commanders, not all of them, because we have some great commanders, but some of them look at it like, ‘Okay, if it doesn’t get to a certain place in investigation, if it doesn’t go all the way up to the court, then it must’ve been a false report.’”

— **Air Force, SAPR/SHARP Responder**

“[Service members may] do things wrong and they’re tolerated because they’re good in one area and [commanders] need them in that one area, but they do other things that are not acceptable.” — **Air Force, Mid-Enlisted, Male**

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings in this report represent the perceptions and recommendations of participants in the *2019 Military Services Gender Relations (2019 MSGR) Focus Groups*. This research is the result of the Office of People Analytics' (OPA) effort to assess the current culture around sexual assault, sexual harassment, and other gender-related issues faced by active duty Service members in 2019. This chapter provides a summary overview of key themes voiced by active duty Service member and Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR)/Sexual Harassment/Assault Response & Prevention (SHARP) SAPR/SHARP responder focus group participants.

For the first time, OPA included a SAPR/SHARP responder focus group at each participating installation in the 2019 data collection effort. SAPR/SHARP responders offer a unique perspective to gender relations issues, as their viewpoint spans many cases, years and, sometimes, Services. SAPR/SHARP responders offered rich information that largely supported and, often, provided greater detail and context for the experiences voiced by active duty Service members participating in focus groups.

Key Themes Voiced by Focus Group Participants

In the previous chapters, we included a thorough review of topics and themes that came out of discussions with active duty Service members and SAPR/SHARP responders. In this section, we provide an overview of the overarching themes and takeaways from across groups, installations, and Services.

Experiences of Younger Service Members

Participants were asked about who influences the culture in their unit and at their installation, as well as who holds the greatest influence on younger Service members (i.e., 17 to 24 years old) and first-term Service members. Participants across groups identified mid-level enlisted Service members and noncommissioned officers (NCO) as having the most influence on younger Service members. Their influence is largely attributed to this group being of a relatable age to younger Service members and having experienced enough to have the know-how of military work and life. Younger Service members observe these leaders and learn from them what behaviors will be accepted and what behaviors will warrant admonishment. Of note, participants pointed out that mid-level enlisted leadership can influence positive behavior *and* negative behavior; if mid-level leadership embodies a negative or hostile work environment or tells inappropriate jokes, younger Service members will pick up on and perpetuate the unacceptable behaviors.

Similarly, mentors and supervisors exert a level of influence on younger Service members, although participants suggested that peers and coworkers likely have a higher level of influence on behavior both inside and outside of the workplace. Across groups, some participants suggested that family, background, or the way someone was raised has the largest impact on a Service member. Participants attributed poor behavior to young Service members' age and lack

of life experiences, whereas others proposed that some people will just behave badly, despite the best efforts of leadership.

In addition, the locations which focus group participants identified as presenting the highest threat of risky behavior were also locations which typically have the highest numbers of younger Service members, such as barracks and military housing, training installations and schoolhouses. These locations are those in which younger Service members have the greatest amount of access to one another and, in many cases, ready access to alcohol. Participants also noted that younger Service members are sometimes targeted by older or more senior Service members in the workplace and in gyms; more common behaviors included staring and gawking, and inappropriate jokes and comments.

Further, SAPR/SHARP responder participants described sexual assault cases which include a younger Service member. They indicated these cases typically involve younger Service members as both the victim *and* the alleged offender. They attributed cases involving younger Service members to younger Service members' lack of experience interacting with their gender of interest; younger Service members' lack of skill in setting healthy boundaries, both in intimate relationships and personal or collegial relationships; and younger Service members' lack of experience in using alcohol in moderation.

Factors that Positively and Negatively Impact Workplace Culture

Focus group participants identified factors indicative of a positive workplace culture, including the treatment of peers and coworkers, maintaining good relationships, and respectability. Positive traits that were most commonly identified also included communication, trust, transparency and approachability, camaraderie and teamwork. Further, the practice of holding Service members accountable for their actions was identified as a pertinent factor that also contributes to a positive workplace. When Service members are held accountable, it stops negative behaviors in the workplace from continuing to occur.

Participants also shared numerous factors and descriptions of indicators of a negative workplace culture. Poor communication, lack of trust, micromanagement, favoritism, and cliques were examples of the traits most commonly attributed to a negative work environment. Participants also attributed a lack of discipline and accountability to why sexual misconduct and/or poor morale may continue. Further, they pointed out that a zero-defect mentality instills fear of making a mistake, increasing the stress felt by unit members. Similarly, a mission-first mentality may also increase the stress felt by unit members.

Gender discrimination also negatively impacts installation and workplace culture. Although most participants acknowledged that gender discrimination is a bad thing, some male participants pointed to their female leaders as proof that gender discrimination is a non-issue in their unit and/or installation or the Services overall. Female participants suggested that their male peers may simply be less able to recognize gender discrimination. Male and female participants pointed to a lack of uniformity in physical fitness standards and that female Service members can be relegated to particular occupations or duties (i.e., desk work) as two key sources of tension between genders. Unequal standards and the appearance of favoritism open the door for doubt in a colleague's abilities. Both male and female participants indicated perceiving that some female

Service members game the system and use their gender to get out of loathsome duties and dangerous deployments.

Male and female participants pointed out that some occupations are less friendly to female Service members than others. They shared that in some occupations, toxic behaviors range from micromanaging to tolerating sexual harassment. Some female participants noted that they have been made to feel unwelcome in particular occupations, and some male participants acknowledged that they and their male peers have knowingly excluded some female peers in order to protect female peers from inappropriate behaviors while maintaining the group culture. Male Service member participants, for example, said that their language or jokes were inappropriate when their female peers are present, but they do not consider it inappropriate in a male-only context and noted that these types of jokes bring the group closer to one another. These male participants, in particular, noted that it is unfortunate that their female peers feel excluded and not part of the group; however, male participants reiterated the importance of team cohesion and cited that this behavior is in pursuit of maintaining cohesion, despite it leaving one or more of their female peers on the outskirts of the team.

Sexual Harassment Remains a Gray Area

Although most Service member participants were confident that they could supply a definition for sexual assault, most admitted that defining and identifying sexual harassment is much more difficult. They pointed out that trainings emphasize the subjective nature of sexual harassment and that trainers focus on both the victim's and bystander's perception of a comment or behavior. Male participants said that most instances of sexual harassment include lower level incidents (e.g., staring, gawking) and that sexual harassment is only really a problem in rare, high-profile cases; whereas female participants proposed their male peers were simply less able to recognize the comments and behaviors that female Service members grow up identifying as problematic. This difficulty in identifying sexual harassment behaviors may point to an area for improvement in training and education about sexual assault and sexual harassment.

Participants also pointed out that in trainings and small group discussions about sexual assault and sexual harassment, male and female participants tend to define sexual harassment differently. As noted above, female participants noted that their male peers often perceive sexual harassment as a rare occurrence that typically involves staring or gawking. Female participants shared their own experiences of problematic behaviors in the workplace, such as experiencing gender-based favoritism from leadership or being the recipient of inappropriate comments and jokes, either in person or via emails or texts. Some participants suggested that in the age of the #MeToo movement, younger Service members may be better educated and better equipped than their older peers to speak up about inappropriate behaviors. Participants suggested that sexual assault prevention trainings should focus more on recognizing sexual harassment and techniques for intervening when behavior falls into the gray area. They further proposed that male and female Service members engage in small group discussions to share perspectives in order to understand the other gender's experiences and to become more of a unified front in combatting inappropriate behavior in the workplace.

Sexual Assault Prevention Trainings

Many participants proposed changes to sexual assault training methods and content. Some participants shared their experiences with frequent but ineffective training. Others suggested that trainings should occur much more frequently, noting that sexual assault prevention training could easily be included in regular safety briefings. Several participants shared positive training experiences, which typically included an engaging trainer or subject matter expert and a small group discussion in which Service members were active participants. They reiterated the importance that the topic should be treated seriously and not just as “checking a box” or a trainer rattling off training content just to get the training over with. Since younger Service members may be hearing this information for the first time and because they frequently take their cues from mid-level leadership, participants emphasized the importance of leaders engaging younger Service members on their level. Participants recommended that trainings make sexual assault and sexual harassment relatable and personal to Service members, perhaps by inviting victims or perpetrators to share their experience with others.

Participants also proposed that there should be additional content during these prevention trainings to provide education and skill-building related to bystander intervention, alcohol education, healthy relationships, consent, and sexual harassment. SAPR/SHARP responder participants shared their experiences of talking to victims who have participated in the trainings and were still misinformed about legal consent. Other participants pointed out the necessity of clear definitions and descriptions and practical skill building. It is not enough to say what to do, rather participants learn more through practice. If Service members have the opportunity to practice their intervening skills, they will be more likely to step in when a peer needs help.

Reporting and Response

Service members who experience sexual assault are generally unlikely to report, though reporting has increased over the past decade (SAPRO, 2019). Participants pointed out that there are numerous reasons a Service member may choose not to report a sexual assault. Service members may be concerned that their information and report will not actually be confidential: Participants shared concerns that leadership gossips and that there is a lack of trust that reports will be handled appropriately. Command climate can have a large impact on Service members’ comfort in reporting a sexual assault or making another complaint. Service members are unlikely to speak up if they do not think they will be taken seriously or if they do not believe their report or complaint will be addressed. SAPR/SHARP responders also pointed out that there is still confusion among Service members as to whom they can make a restricted report. They proposed that rather than inadvertently making an unrestricted report, Service members may not make a report at all. They may simply be unwilling to risk the incident going public.

Participants noted that despite ample and frequent training opportunities, many of their peers remain uncertain about the reporting process. For example, participants shared concerns regarding a fear of retaliation, of their report being made public if they do not want it to be, and confusion about whether they will be punished for collateral offenses (e.g., underage drinking). SAPR/SHARP responders said that they receive a lot of inquiries over the phone. Many of these inquiries do not seem to become reports, rather they receive calls from Service members seeking

more information while working to protect their anonymity. Anonymity and confidentiality were resounding reporting themes in the *2019 MSGR* focus groups.

To increase the reporting of incidents of sexual assault and sexual harassment, participants proposed increasing the visibility of SAPR/SHARP offices and staff. They reiterated the importance of Service members knowing who their victim advocate is, how to access SAPR/SHARP services, and that they can trust SAPR/SHARP responder to keep their information confidential and to handle their report appropriately. Participants deemed civilian staff as beneficial for differentiating the SAPR/SHARP responder from command and increasing trust in SAPR/SHARP representatives. Participants noted that stigma from command can come from a case being dismissed. Commanders may not know how to interpret the legal proceedings and may assume the allegations were false. When victims are stigmatized or moved from their support structure, it can be detrimental to their well-being. Participants noted that others may be reluctant to report after witnessing how their peers have been treated during and after the process.

Perceived Areas of Improvement for Leadership

Focus group participants described “leadership” across multiple levels. They provided their feedback and perceptions with regard to leadership at their unit level and up to the overall Service level. Participants noted satisfaction with Service-level leadership, noting that military culture is, albeit slowly, heading in the “right” direction. Service-level leadership is perceived to be bought into effecting change and making the military overall a more inclusive workplace. However, Service member participants pointed out that their more immediate leadership may lack the experience or training needed to effectively address sexual assault prevention and gender discrimination in the workplace. A commander’s mission-first mentality can push SAPR trainings or consistent accountability for poor behavior to the side; this can lead Service members to lose trust in their local leadership or feel that their leadership does not care about their concerns.

Unit leadership, according to participants, carries the weight of instilling a positive and healthy workplace culture for Service members. These responsibilities include role modeling appropriate language and behavior, communicating and directing unit level goals, and correcting inappropriate behavior consistently across Service members. Participants pointed to toxic leaders as those who instill a “zero-mistake” mentality in their units, noting that this can breed a culture of fear of reprisal and stifle personal and professional growth. Toxic leaders are unaware of or do not respond to high levels of stress in their units. Participants noted that high levels of stress from unchecked inappropriate behavior can lead to Service members acting out in unhealthy ways, such high levels of alcohol use or exhibiting inappropriate behavior (e.g., lewd jokes, groping) toward their peers. Positive, healthy workplaces are the result of constructive, trusted leaders.

Conclusion

The questions and activities used to stimulate the discussions captured in the preceding report were designed with the goal of obtaining actionable insights to inform policies and programs across the Armed Services. Themes and findings from the *2019 MSGR Focus Groups* with

Service members and SAPR/SHARP responders will contribute to our collective understanding of the experiences and gender relations of Service members on U.S. military installations. These findings will support the Department's mission to reduce and eliminate sexual assault and sexual harassment in the U.S. Military.

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Appendix A.

Active Duty Focus Group Guide

**DATA
DRIVEN
SOLUTIONS
FOR
DECISION
MAKERS**



Active Duty Focus Group Guide

Active Duty Focus Groups

Discussion Guide

Purpose: From the WGRA 2018 results, OPA knows that unhealthy climates can increase one's risk for sexual assault. The focus of these sessions will be to better understand the lower level destructive and unhealthy climate and cultural factors in the continuum of harm. These sessions will also focus on how to improve prevention efforts. To explore this we will seek to answer the following questions:

- What factors contribute to an installation's culture?
 - What creates a positive workplace culture?
 - What creates a poor workplace culture?
 - How do these factors change by occupation/groups?
 - What is different about this installation from other installations?
- Who creates an installation's culture?
 - What role does senior leadership play in setting culture?
 - What role does mid-level leadership play in setting culture?
 - What role do younger (17 to 24 years old) Service members play in setting culture?
 - What does leading by example look like, when it comes to gender relations?
- How does an installation's culture affect gender relations?
 - What does sexual harassment look like at installations?
 - What does gender discrimination look like at installations?
 - How does that effect change by group?
- How can the sexual assault prevention programs be improved?

NOTES TO REVIEWER

This discussion guide is not a script and therefore will not be read verbatim. The moderator will use these questions as a roadmap and probe as needed to maintain the natural flow of conversation.

Moderator instructions are highlighted in yellow.

Session Overview (90 minutes)

Introduction & Warm-up (10 min)

The moderator will explain the purpose of the focus groups, present the ground rules, allow participants to ask any questions, and build rapport with a warm-up question.

Understanding the Installation's Culture (30 min)

Discussion will seek to understand the general culture at installations, how it changes by group, how it affects gender relations including sexual harassment and gender discrimination, and what participants consider a healthy and unhealthy workplace climate.

Who Creates Culture (25 min)

Discussion will seek to understand who creates a healthy and unhealthy workplace climate and installation culture, as well as who influences younger Service members.

Prevention (20 min)

Discussion will seek to understand what tools can change culture and augment prevention.

Conclusion (5 min)

Moderator ensures that all participant questions are answered and all comments have been heard before ending the session.

A. Introduction & Warm-up (10 min)

Hello everyone. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. My name is _____. My colleague, _____, and I are here on behalf of the DoD Office of People Analytics, also known as OPA. While I will be leading today's discussion, _____ will be taking notes so that I can concentrate on what everyone is saying today.

- **This is intended to be a conversation among peers.** I know we are at a military installation and there are policies in place for how to act and when to speak, but for the purposes of this discussion I encourage you to speak freely as peers.
- **Your participation is completely voluntary,** meaning that you do not have to answer every question and you can withdraw from this discussion at any time. However, I do encourage your full participation today to ensure that I am getting a representative response.
- **There are no wrong answers.** As Service members at this installation you are the experts on your own perspective on the topics we plan to discuss, and I'm here to listen to you and get your thoughts. Please speak up, especially if what you have to say is different than what someone else is saying. You may represent what a lot of other people think. I was hired to run this focus group so you won't hurt my feelings or offend me with whatever you say. I don't have a personal stake in these results.
- **We are not trying to come to consensus.** It's OK for there to be disagreement and in fact I welcome different points of view. Please share what is true for you. In the spirit of this, I ask that you remain respectful of each other's opinions during our discussion. Everyone in this room may see things differently and we want to hear everyone's perspective.
- **This is a non-attribution session.** Your name and personal information will not be used in any of our reports. We ask your cooperation in protecting the privacy of the comments made within this session by not saying anything that would identify you or other participants. For example, do not state your name. In addition, we also ask that you do not discuss the focus group proceedings after you leave.
- We will be **audio-recording today's session.** The audio files will be transcribed and then destroyed after 90 days. **By staying in the room you are consenting to being recorded.**
- Our discussion should take no longer than **90 minutes.**

The information you provide today is a part of a larger effort that will help DoD leadership to better understand issues around installation culture and climate here as well as at the other military installations.

In the interest of time, we may need to move on from one topic to get to another area of interest.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Okay, great! Why don't we start with you telling me a little bit about yourself? This will not be documented in the transcript. We will go around the room and please let me know

1. If you did or did not seek out being stationed at this installation
2. What is a hobby or activity you like to participate in around here when you are off-duty?

B. Prevention (20 min)

[Moderator note: DO NOT ASK IN SENIOR ENLISTED GROUP] Before we get started, some of the questions we will ask revolve around age of a service member. To assist in this discussion, I'd like to get a sense for how many of you are under the age of 25. Please raise your hand if you fall into this age range.

Great, thank you!

Internal Note: Grading on Sexual Assault Prevention

The goal of this activity is to identify what certain groups are doing well around prevention and what they can do better around prevention and sexual assault.

Task: Focus group participants will receive a sheet of paper with the "grades" A through F on it per below. Participants will be asked to circle a grade for Service-level leadership/peers across all levels of leadership before discussing. Asking participants to circle a grade on paper helps mitigate groupthink and allows for greater breadth of thoughts. Note that varying levels of leadership will be differentiated in the discussion as grades for each level and the rationale for the grades are discussed.

Now, I would like everyone to take a moment and think about [Service: Army/Navy/Air Force/Marine Corps] leadership. How would you grade their efforts to prevent **sexual assault** in the [Service: Army/Navy/Air Force/Marine Corps]?

MODERATOR NOTE: Hand out grading exercise for Service Leadership. Let the participants pass them around.

I understand this grade may depend on an individual person, but let's start by grading leadership as a whole and then we can discuss more specifics.

A B C D F

Probe: Tell me some **reasons** for your "grade?"

Probe: What are some things they do to prevent sexual assault?

Probe: What can they do to get a higher grade?

How would you grade their handling of issues related to sexual harassment?

MODERATOR NOTE: Collect Service leadership handout

Who else plays a role in preventing sexual assault?

Probe: What are they doing well?

Probe: What are some areas for improvement?

Thinking about the SAPR/SHARP program, what role can it play in creating a positive culture around gender?

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Probe: What role does leadership play in prevention activities?

Probe: What role should leadership play in prevention activities?

Now I would like for you to think about other prevention programs you have seen during your time in the military, for example, prevention programs around suicide or drunk driving.

What elements of other prevention programs have you found the most useful?

Probe: What about these programs did you find useful?

Probe: How could the SAPR/SHARP program incorporate these elements?

C. Understanding the Installation's Culture (40 min)

Internal Note: Mapping Risky Behaviors

The goal of this activity is to identify locations where risky behaviors occur and to prompt discussion on these locations as to what factors cause them to be safe/unsafe. This includes locations on and off military installations.

Task: Participants will be presented with a map of their installation and surrounding area. They will be asked to place stickers symbolizing risky behaviors (i.e. out of control drinking, hearing gendered talk, unwanted touching) on this map for a few minutes. After a short period of placing stickers, the moderator will prompt a discussion about these locations.

What I would like for you to do now is take a look at this map of your installation. You will also see a page of stickers.

MODERATOR: Hold up the map and pages of stickers in view of the participants. Hand out materials.

MODERATOR: pass out stickers

These stickers represent behaviors or experiences related to sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and sexual assault. There is a key of what each color sticker represents.

While this is a map of this installation, also think about the last two or three installations you have been assigned at as well. If there's a location off-base you'd like to place a sticker on, please place the sticker on the white margin, and label it with a pen to the best of your ability. Place as many or as few stickers as you like. Are there any questions before we begin?

What are some of the locations you placed your stickers?

Probe: Talk me through your thought process.

Probe: How would this map look different for younger Service members?

Probe: How would this map look different for men and women?

What are some locations where you feel that things can get out of hand, or out of control?

Probe: What are some things about these environments that contribute to this feeling?

Thinking about drinking specifically, where did you put stickers indicating out of control situations that involve drinking?

Probe: What type of environment is this (bars, clubs, house or hotel party)

Probe: What about these places contribute to things getting out of hand?

Probe: How do people find out about these places?

How could these stickers be removed? What would need to happen?

What could installation leadership do to make these areas feel safer/more comfortable?

What could mid-level leadership do to make these areas feel safer/more comfortable?

What could your peers do to make these areas feel safer/more comfortable?

How comfortable would a Service member be intervening in some of these behaviors if they were to witness them?

Now thinking about when you return from extended military duties, How does [Service: Army/Navy/Air Force/Marine Corps] message safety around times you return from extended military duties? These may be things like liberty, port calls, or returning from a foreign deployment.

[For junior enlisted] **Probe:** How did you celebrate completing basic military training?

I would like for you to think about the past four years and think about the installations where you have been stationed in that time.

When you first arrive at an installation, what are some of the things that stand out to you about the day-to-day at these installations or might make installations different?

Probe: What are some things that you like about being at these installations?

Probe: What are some things you don't like?

Probe: What do people do for fun or to blow off steam at installations where you have served?

Probe: If this is your first installation, how did this installation meet or not meet your expectations?

Now I would like to talk about some additional parts of life at military installations.

What are some other factors that play a role in how Service members interact at an installation?

Probe: What are some things Service members do on-base when they are off-duty?

Probe: What role does social media play?

Probe: How about dating and meetup apps?

Now I would like for you to shift your thinking to your workplace at installations, what are the things at these locations that impact your workplace culture?

Probe: How does geographic location impact the culture of your workplace?

Probe: How does this being a [Army/Navy/Air Force/Marine Corps] installation impact the culture of your workplace?

Probe: Do most people like working at the installations where you've served? Do most people not? If there's a mix, who wins out?

Probe: If people are negative or don't like working at these installations, how does that impact your workplace?

What are some of the different groups (i.e. occupation, cliques) you have encountered at military installations?

Internal- Note: Sticky Note Culture Activity

The goal of this activity is to identify what makes a workplace toxic.

Task: Group participants will be asked to write elements of healthy and unhealthy workplaces onto sticky notes (e.g. post-its) to facilitate engaging discussion and idea-generation.

Now I would like you to think about what makes a positive or negative experience in the military workplace, particularly thinking about the interactions you have with those you work with.

When you think about a good working environment in the military, what are some words and behaviors that come to mind? As you think of these words and behaviors, please write them on the [color one] sticky notes in front of you and place them on the left side of the easel.

MODERATOR: HAVE PARTICIPANTS PLACE NOTES ON THE LEFT SIDE OF THE EASEL

How do these positive traits impact the well-being of a military workplace?

Now, let's list some words and behaviors you associate with a negative workplace. Please write these negative elements on the [color two] sticky notes and place them on the right side of the easel when you're finished.

MODERATOR: HAVE PARTICIPANTS PLACE NOTES ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE EASEL

Are there different words you would use to describe a toxic workplace?

Probe: How might male versus female Service members differ in their responses?

In your own words, tell me what sexual harassment in the military workplace looks like.

Probe: How might male versus female Service members answer differently?

Probe: How might it look different across occupations?

Probe: How might it look different across other groups?

Probe: How might it look different at different installations?

Probe: What about gender discrimination?

Probe: How has workplace leadership handled these issues?

Probe: How do various levels of leadership differ in how they handle these issues?

Now I would like you to tell me what words you would use to describe your experience with workplace culture.

Probe: How might male versus female Service members respond differently?

Probe: Are there work cultures that are more positive for younger Service members?

How might the positive trait we listed at the start of this activity have an impact on sexual harassment in the workplace?

Probe: How about gender discrimination?

Probe: Given unlimited resources, how would you make a toxic workplace more civil

If you've been in a workplace where people don't treat each other dignity and respect, what helped change that workplace?

Probe: What made it worse?

Probe: Was there anything that changed a workplace from civil to uncivil?

Are there groups of people who don't feel like they belong in the workplace?

Probe: Who is excluded in their workplace?

Probe: Who is excluded socially?



D. Who Creates Culture (15 min)

Now I'd like to change gears a little bit.

When you first come to a new duty location, who has the greatest impact on your perception of the installation and defining the culture?

Probe: When did they teach you these things?

How might a younger Service member between the ages 17 to 24 learn how to adapt?

MODERATOR: Probe around the differences in these age groups for junior officers and junior enlisted.

Probe: What might be different for younger Service member men and women?

I would like to take a few minutes to discuss the different people who might influence a Service member.

First, I would like for you to think about a younger Service member tell me who you think is the most influential for the younger Service member in general.

Probe: What makes this person influential?

Probe: Who is less influential?

Probe: Where does mid-level leadership fall?

Probe: How does this differ if this younger Service member is enlisted or an officer?

Probe: Now how would this change if I had asked about who influences what younger Service members say?

Probe: What about when it comes to who influences what younger Service members do?

Probe: How does this change when thinking about who influences what younger Service members do privately or behind closed doors?

Probe: What about for what younger Service members think?

Probe: Do these influencers change by gender?

Who is most influential in shaping ideas around appropriate workplace behavior?

Probe: How do these people lead by example?



Probe: When it comes to gender relations, what does leading by example look like?

[For: mid enlisted, senior enlisted, all officers] What do you see as your role in setting appropriate work place behavior?

What types of role models does the [Service: Army/Navy/Air Force/Marine Corps] give you to emulate?

Probe: How would you describe the ideal member of the [Service: Army/Navy/Air Force/Marine Corps]?

Probe: Some service members throughout history are respected as role models in today's military, who is this person?

Think about the individuals you look up to as role models within your Service. What is it about this person/people that make you look up to them? You could probe to get at things the individuals says/does that make him/her a role model.

F. Conclusion (5 min)

[TIME PERMITTING] I appreciate your time today and the discussion we have had. Is there anything that you would like to share that you didn't have the chance to share yet?

Thank you again for your participation. Enjoy the remainder of your day.

Appendix B. SAPR/SHARP Responder Focus Group Guide

**DATA
DRIVEN
SOLUTIONS
FOR
DECISION
MAKERS**



SAPR/SHARP Responder Focus Group Guide

First Responder Focus Groups

Discussion Guide

A. Introduction & Warm-up (10 min)

Hello everyone. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. My name is _____. My colleague, _____, and I are here on behalf of the DoD Office of People Analytics, also known as OPA. While I will be leading today's discussion, _____ will be taking notes so that I can concentrate on what everyone is saying today.

- **This is intended to be a conversation among peers.** I know we are at a military installation and there are policies in place for how to act and when to speak, but for the purposes of this discussion I encourage you to speak freely as peers.
- **Your participation is completely voluntary,** meaning that you do not have to answer every question and you can withdraw from this study at any time. However, I do encourage your full participation today to ensure that I am getting a representative response.
- **There are no wrong answers.** As first responders to sexual assault at this installation you are the experts on your own perspective on the topics we plan to discuss, and I'm here to listen to you and get your thoughts. Please speak up, especially if what you have to say is different than what someone else is saying. You may represent what a lot of other people think. I was hired to run this focus group so you won't hurt my feelings or offend me with whatever you say. I don't have a personal stake in these results.
- **We are not trying to come to consensus.** It's OK for there to be disagreement and in fact I welcome different points of view. Please share what is true for you. In the spirit of this, I ask that you remain respectful of each other's opinions during our discussion. Everyone in this room may see things differently and we want to hear everyone's perspective.
- **This is a non-attribution session.** Your name and personal information will not be used in any of our reports. We ask your cooperation in protecting the privacy of the comments made within this session by not saying anything that would identify you or other participants. For example, do not state your name. In addition, we also ask that you do not discuss the focus group proceedings after you leave.
- We will be **audio-recording today's session.** The audio files will be transcribed and then destroyed after 90 days. **By staying in the room you are consenting to being recorded.**
- Our discussion should take no longer than **90 minutes.**

The information you provide today is a part of a larger study that will help DoD leadership to better understand issues around installation culture and climate here as well as at the other military installations.

In the interest of time, we may need to move on from one topic to get to another area of interest.

Before we begin, I would like to caution the group to please not discuss the details of specific cases we are here to speak about these topics broadly. This discussion will help inform DoD and your Service's SAPR office.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Okay, great! Why don't we start with you telling me a little bit about yourself? We will go around the room and please let me know

What is your role, how long you have been doing it, and have you been at other installations?

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B. Understanding the Installation's Cases (35 min)

We are interested in learning about the nature of the cases of sexual assault at this installation in order to better understand risk in the military over all.

Are there characteristics about this installation that make Service members here at higher or lower risk for sexual assault?

Probe: What are they?

Without sharing identifying information about cases such as names, what are some common themes to cases that you see?

Probe: How is alcohol involved?

Probe: How are dating apps or social media involved?

Probe: What does on installation versus off installation look like?

Probe: (For Navy/Marine Corps cases) Are people on liberty or port calls?

Probe: How are cases different for men and women?

Probe: How are cases different for younger Service members (ages 18-24) versus older Service members (25 and older)?

How are cases that you see at this installation different than cases at other installations?

Probe: How are they similar?

Internal Note: Mapping Risky Behaviors

The goal of this activity is to identify locations where risky behaviors occur and to prompt discussion on these locations as to what factors cause them to be safe/unsafe. This includes locations on and off military installations.

Task: Participants will be presented with a map of their installation and surrounding area. They will be asked to place stickers symbolizing risky behaviors (i.e. out of control drinking, hearing gendered talk, unwanted touching) on this map for a few minutes. After a short period of placing stickers, the moderator will prompt a discussion about these locations.

What I would like for you to do now is take a look at this map of your installation. You will also see a page of stickers.

MODERATOR: Hold up the map and pages of stickers in view of the participants. Hand out materials.

MODERATOR: pass out stickers

These stickers represent behaviors or experiences related to sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and sexual assault. There is a key of what each color sticker represents.

If there's a location off-base you'd like to place a sticker on, please place the sticker on the white margin, and label it with a pen to the best of your ability. Place as many or as few stickers as you like. Are there any questions before we begin?

What are some of the locations you placed your stickers?

Probe: Talk me through your thought process.

Probe: How would this map look different for younger versus older Service members?

Probe: How would this map look different for men and women?

What are some locations where you feel that things can get out of hand, or out of control?

Probe: What are some things about these environments that contribute to this feeling?

How could these stickers be removed? What would need to happen?

What could installation leadership do to make these areas feel safer?

C. Reporting and Response (20 min)

Now thinking about the differences in the types of reports that are made.

What are some unique characteristics you see in Restricted cases, compared to Unrestricted cases?

What are some unique characteristics of cases you see where a victim might come in to the SARC office to talk, but not report?

What are some characteristics of cases where the victim does not show up in the SARC office at all?

What would you do to increase reporting?

Thinking about the response system, what about the response system work well at this installation?

Probe: What about the response system don't work well at this installation?

Probe: If you could make changes to the response system, what would they be?

What training deficits do you have?

Probe: What would you like to know more about?

What do you need funding for?

What is the special victim's counsel/victim's legal counsel capability like at this installation?

Probe: Do you all work in the same office or workspace, or are you separate?

D. Prevention (20 min)

We have been discussing life here at this installation.

Internal Note: Grading on Sexual Assault Prevention

The goal of this activity is to identify what certain groups are doing well around prevention and what they can do better around prevention and sexual assault.

Task: Focus group participants will receive a sheet of paper with the “grades” A through F on it per below. Participants will be asked to circle a grade for Service-level leadership/peers before discussing. Asking participants to circle a grade on paper helps mitigate groupthink and allows for greater breadth of thoughts.

Now, I would like everyone to take a moment and think about [Service: Army/Navy/Air Force/Marine Corps] Service-level leadership. How would you grade their efforts to prevent sexual assault in the [Service: Army/Navy/Air Force/Marine Corps]?

MODERATOR NOTE: Hand out grading exercise for Service Leadership. Let the participants pass them around.

I understand this grade may depend on an individual person, but let’s start by grading leadership as a whole and then we can discuss more specifics.

A B C D F

Probe: Tell me some reasons for your “grade?”

Probe: What are some things they do to prevent sexual assault?

Probe: What can they do to get a higher grade?

Probe: What can the installation do to help them get a higher grade?

Probe: How can leadership help you perform your duties?

How would you grade their handling of issues related to sexual harassment?

MODERATOR NOTE: Collect Service leadership handout

Who else plays a role in preventing sexual assault?

Probe: What are they doing well?

Probe: What are some areas for improvement?

Thinking about the SAPR/SHARP program, what things work well in supporting your ability to perform your job?

Probe: What elements of the program get in the way of your ability to do your job?

Probe: What could be done to better support your mission?

Probe: What role can the program play in creating a positive culture around gender?

Now I would like for you to think about other prevention programs you have seen during your time working with the military, for example, prevention programs around suicide or drunk driving.

What elements of other prevention programs have you found the most useful?

Probe: How could the SAPR/SHARP program incorporate these elements?

7

F. Conclusion (5 min)

We are just about done for the day, but one last question before we wrap up.

If you were able to tell DoD SAPRO one thing in an effort to change the program for the future, what would you want them to know?

[TIME PERMITTING] I appreciate your time today and the discussion we have had. Is there anything that you would like to share that you didn't have the chance to share yet?

Thank you again for your participation. Enjoy the remainder of your day.

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Appendix C.

Focus Group Handouts

**DATA
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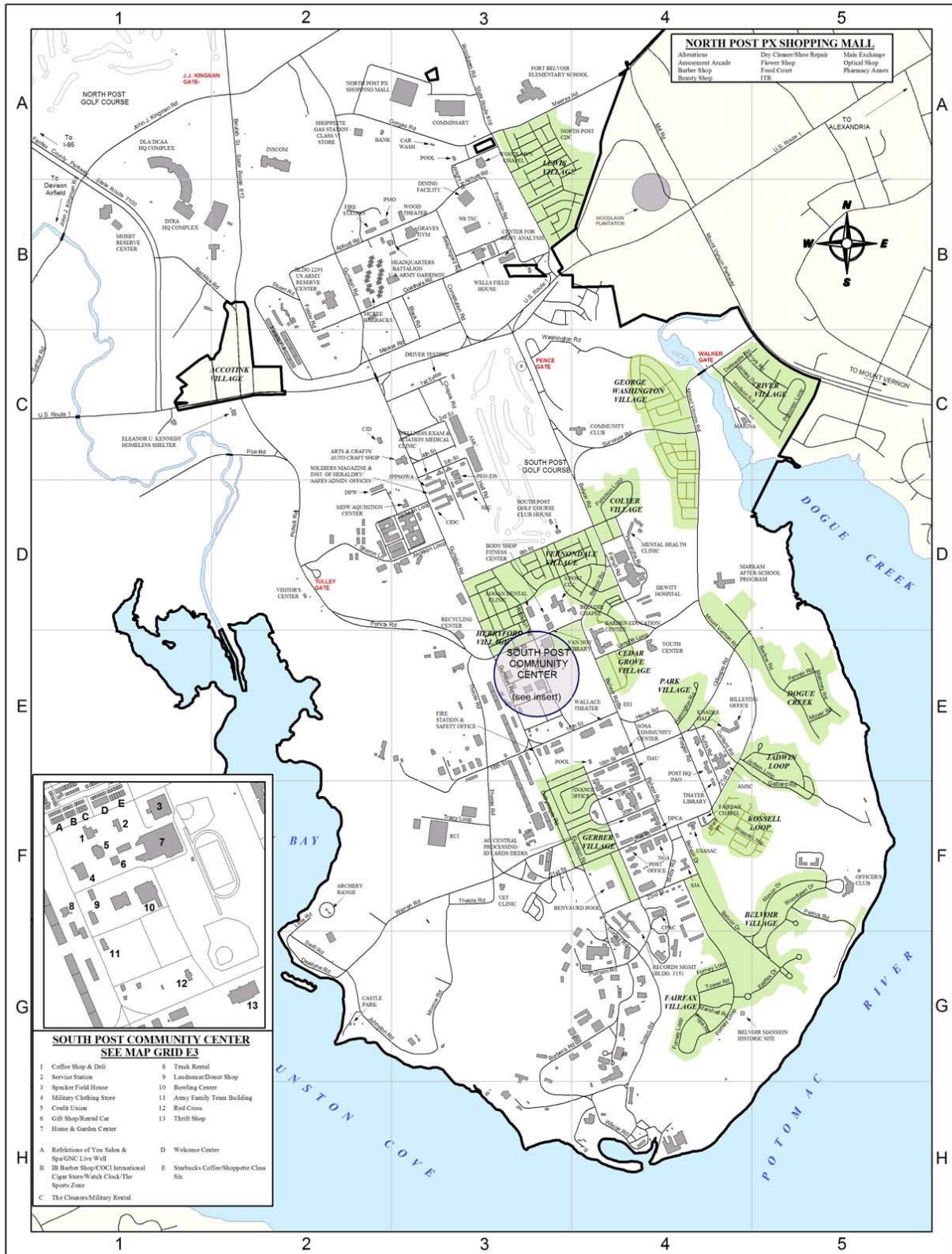


Focus Group Handouts

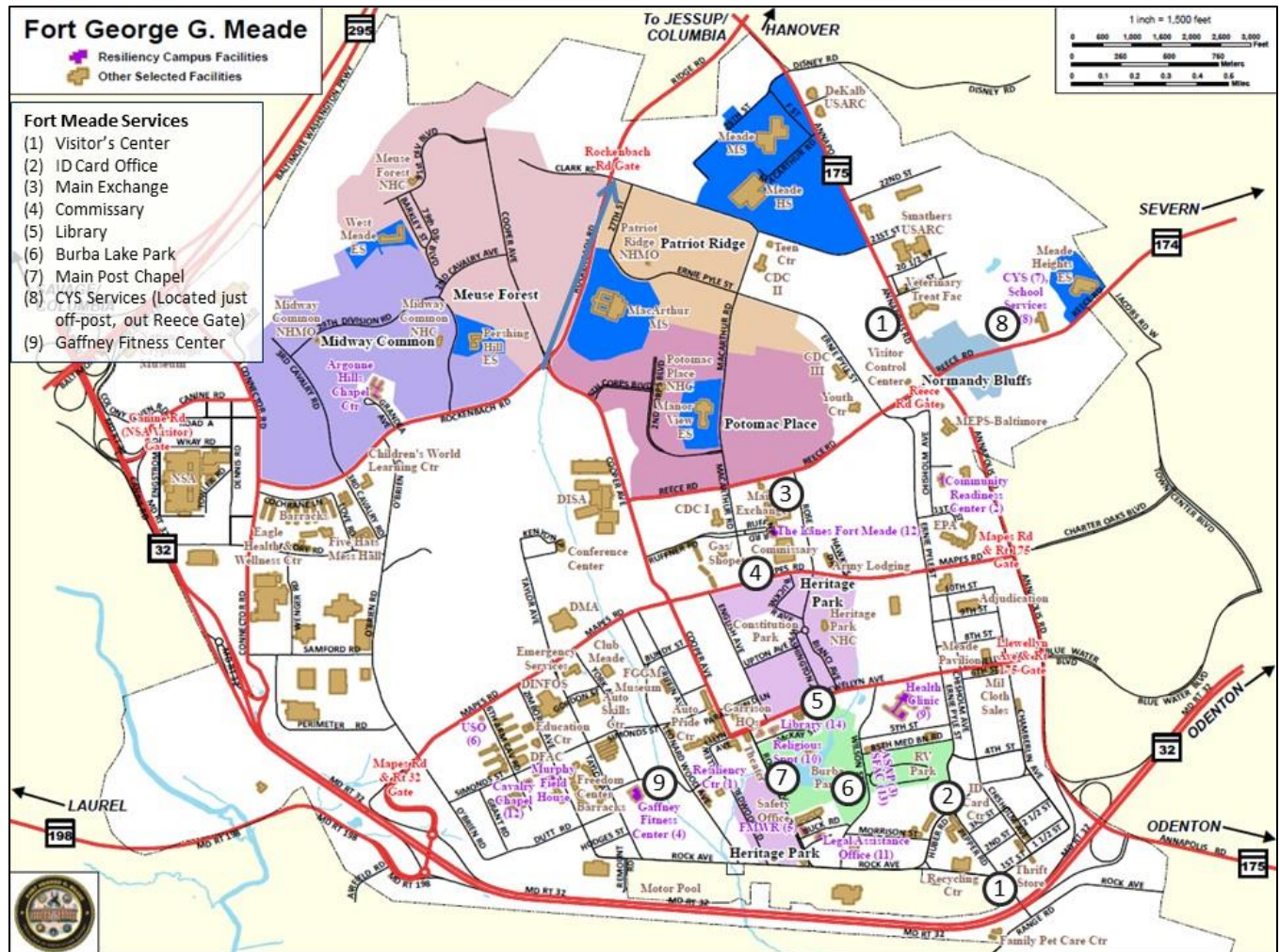
Grade for Service Leadership

A B C D F

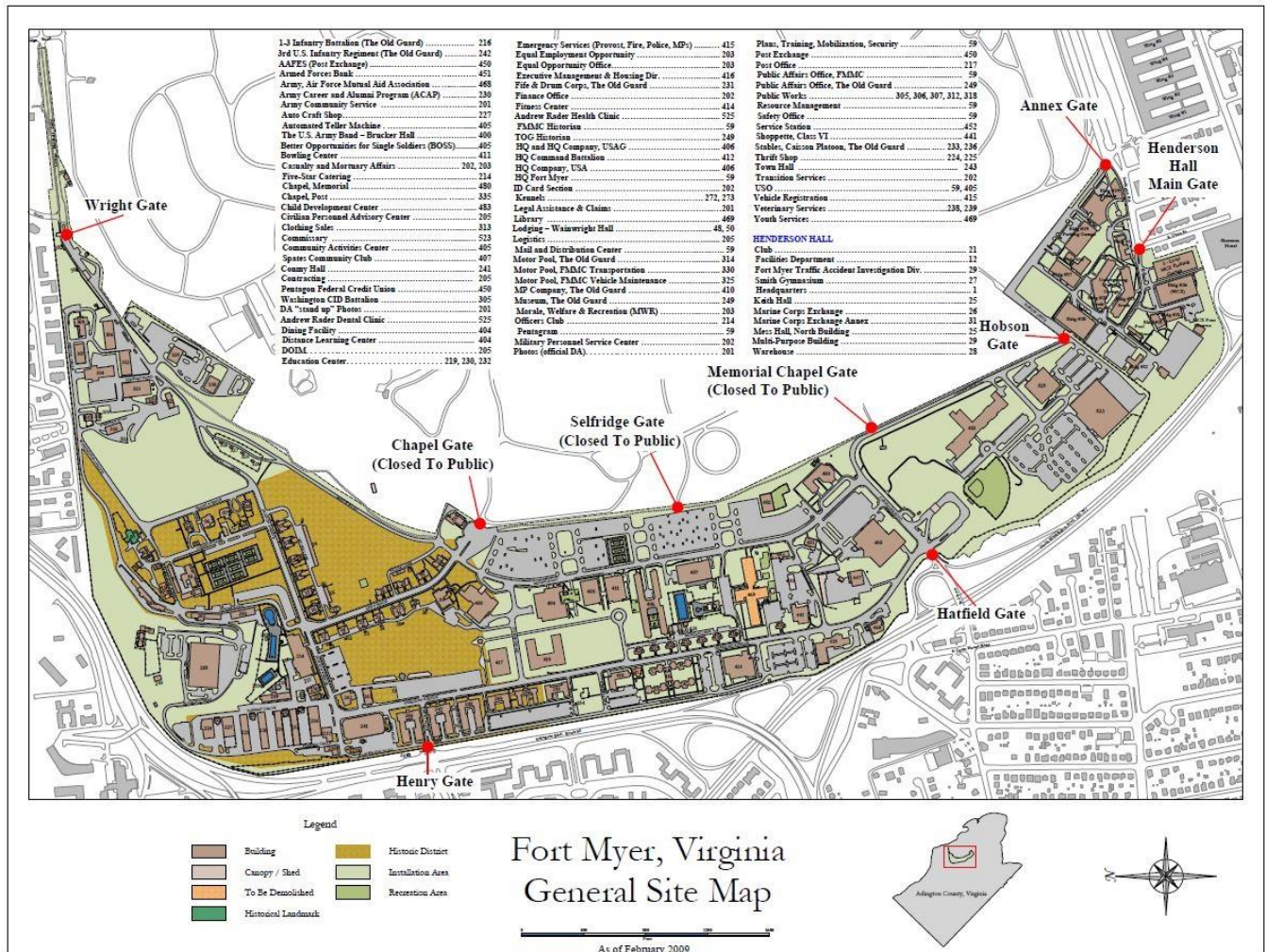
Fort Belvoir Installation Map



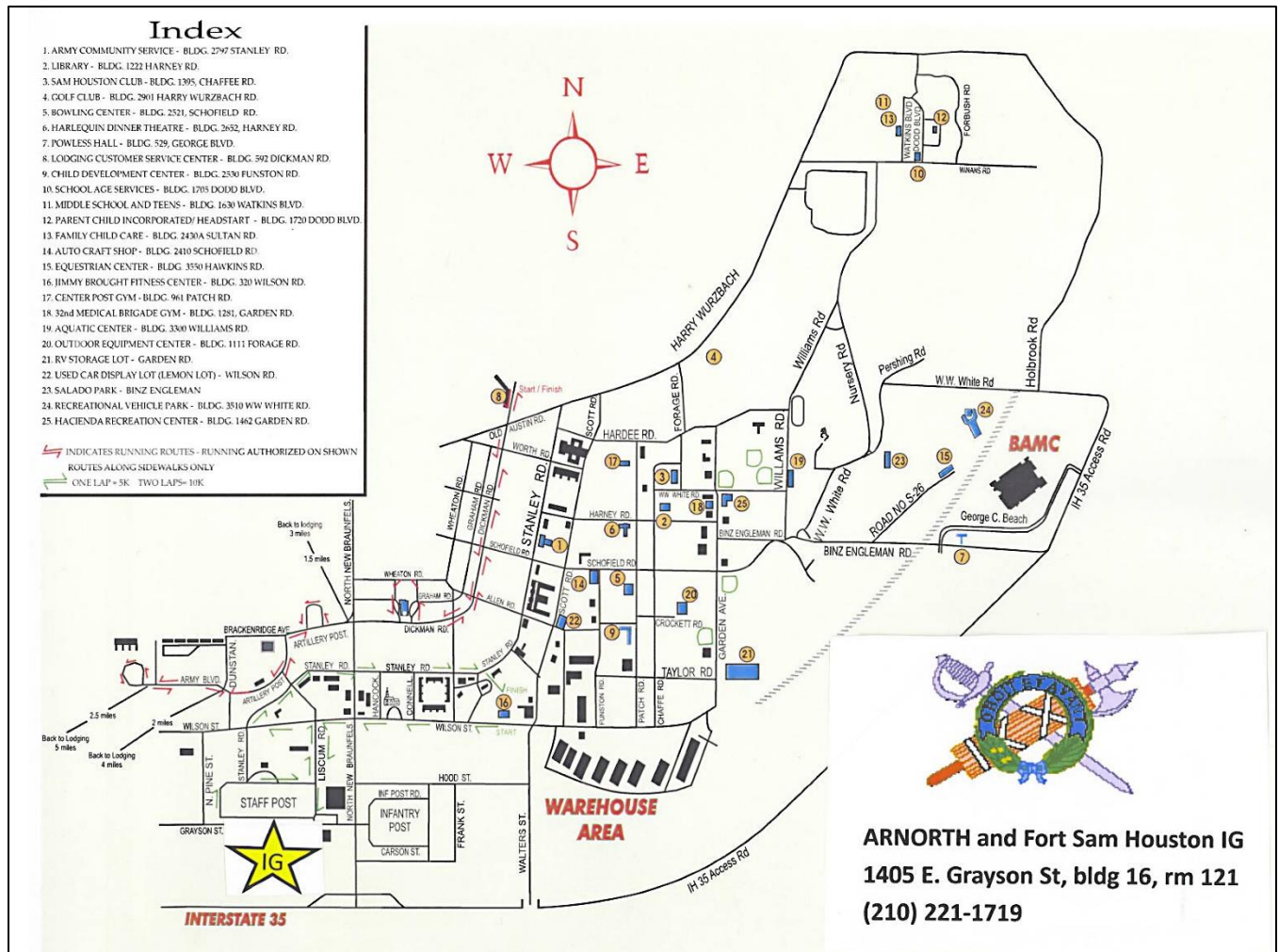
Fort Meade Installation Map



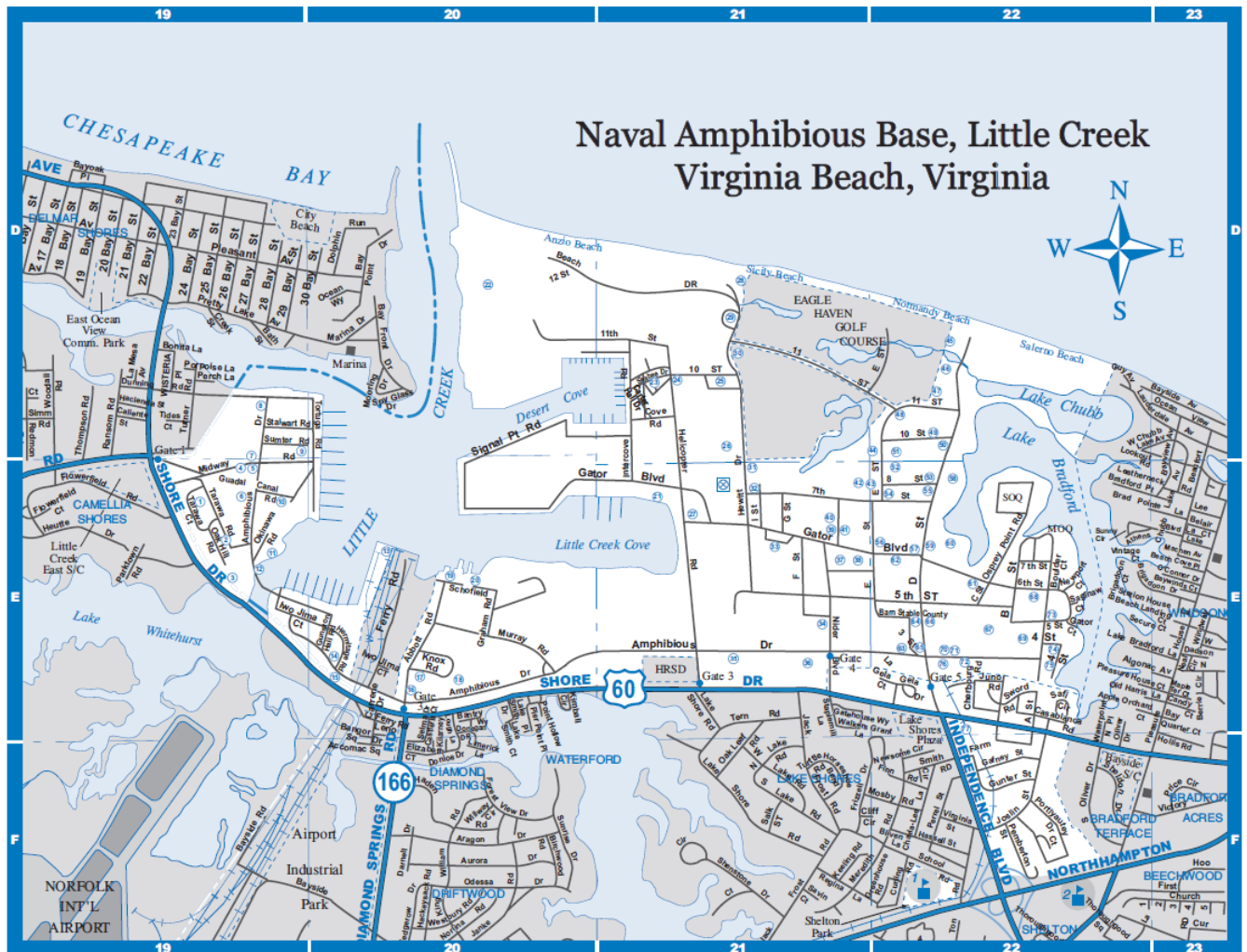
Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall Installation Map



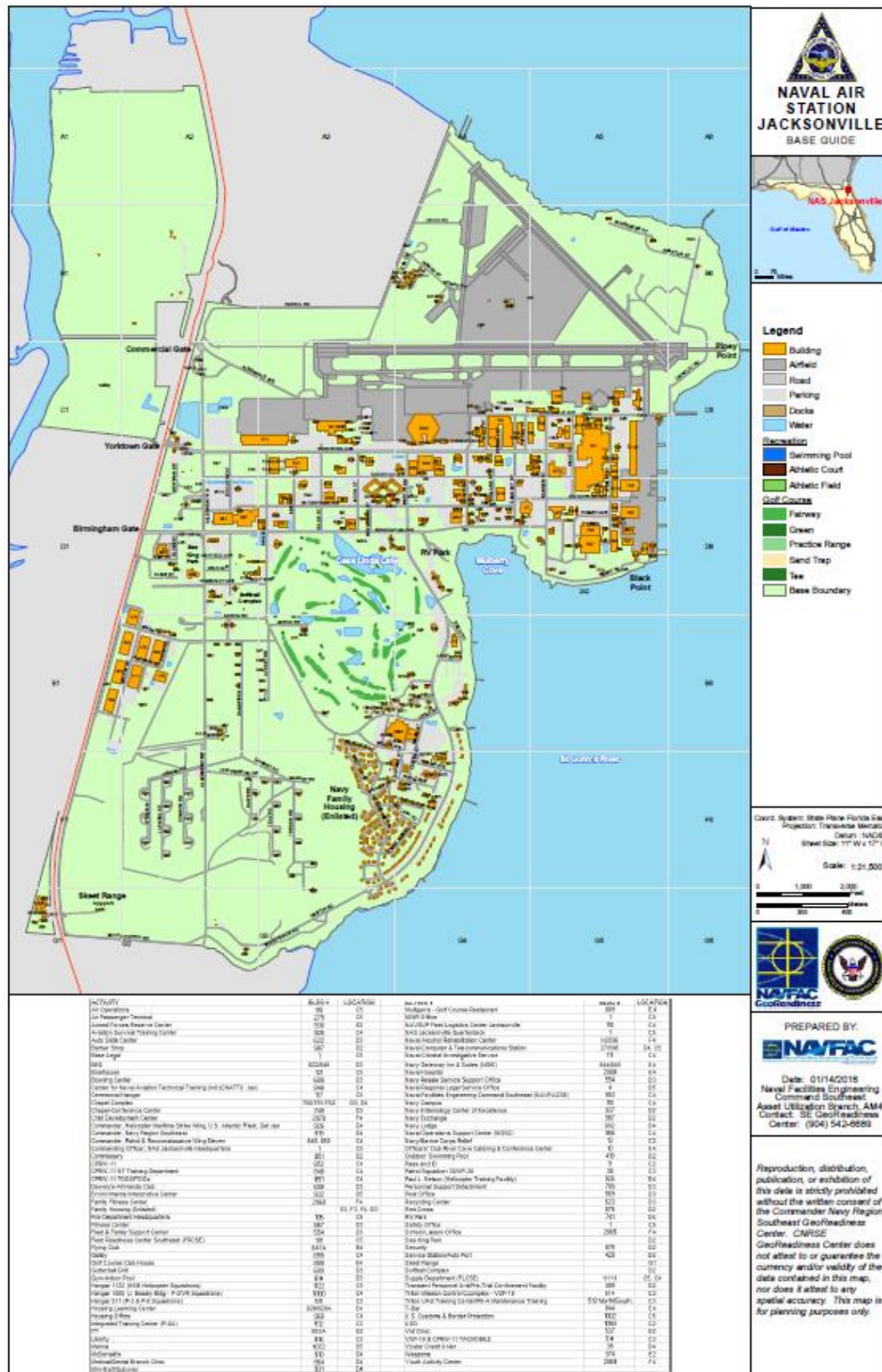
Joint Base San Antonio Installation Map



Joint Expeditionary Base – Little Creek Installation Map



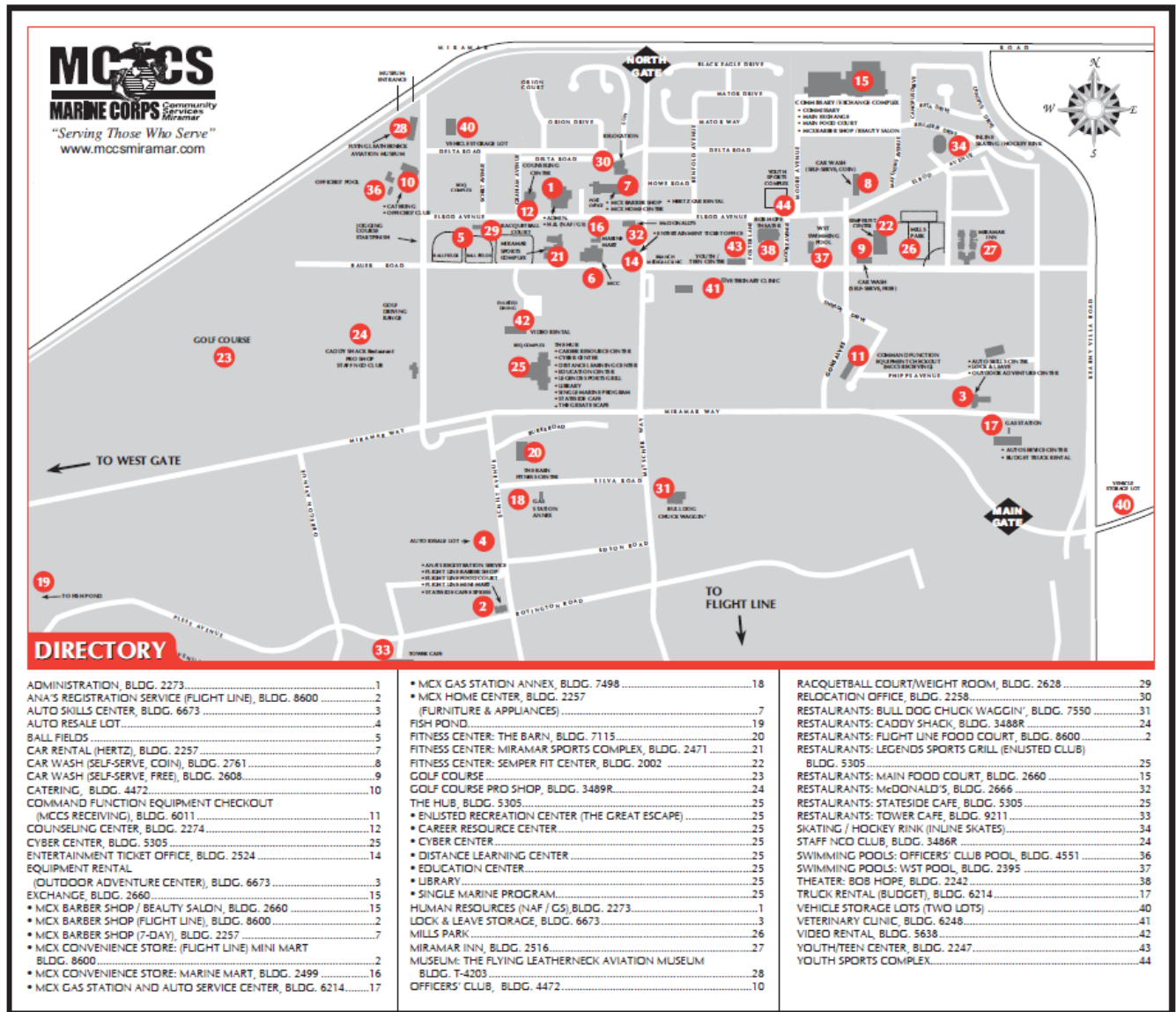
Naval Air Station Jacksonville Installation Map



Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms Installation Map



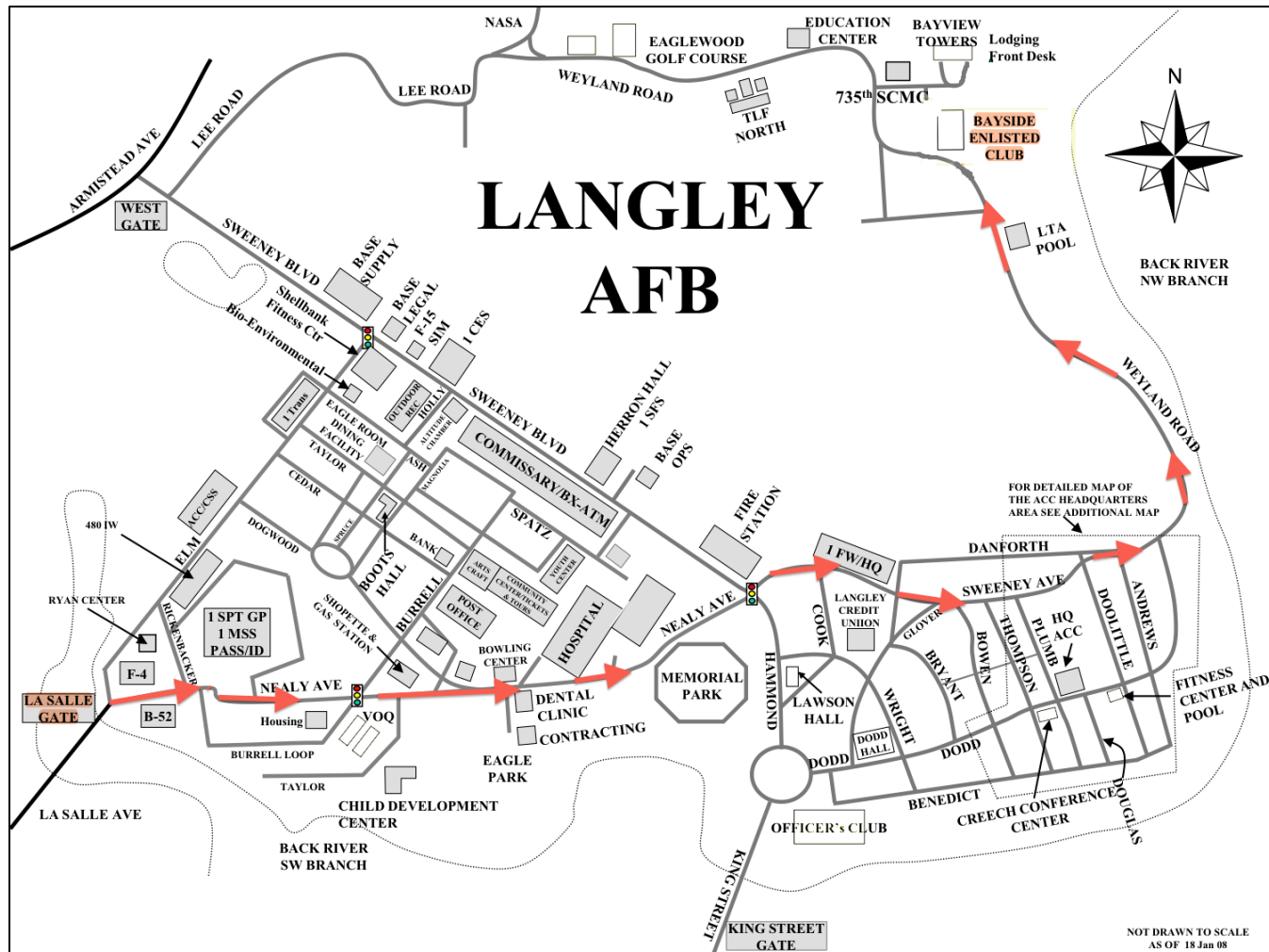
Marine Corps Air Station Miramar Installation Map



Goodfellow Air Force Base Installation Map



Langley Air Force Base Installation Map



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