

MIRIAM MATTHEWS, COREEN FARRIS

Harmful Interpersonal Behaviors in the Department of the Air Force

Informing Prevention and Response

The U.S. Department of the Air Force (DAF) is committed to helping its members thrive by enhancing well-being and eliminating harmful behaviors, particularly those affecting interpersonal interactions and relationships (Interpersonal Violence Task Force, 2021). These behaviors include sexual assault, sexual harassment, racial/ethnic harassment and discrimination, hazing, bullying, and domestic abuse.¹ This Perspective provides a description of the scope of this collection of harmful interpersonal behaviors and a brief overview of current DAF prevention strategies.²

Given the complexity of the topic, we summarize the RAND Corporation's conceptual model of harmful interpersonal behaviors in this Perspective as a way of organizing the conversation and the many potential prevention strategies for each behavior. This model is not meant to compete with other organizing models of behavior originating in public health or criminal justice, and this Perspective is not

intended to serve as a comprehensive review of all potentially relevant models for harmful interpersonal behaviors.³ Rather, we simply use this model as a different angle from which to view a set of behaviors that have been challenging to understand, respond to, and prevent. Within this framework, we offer a series of suggestions, based on theory and research, for strategies to consider either for a specific harmful interpersonal behavior or, in some cases, more than one. Some of these suggestions involve novel approaches that have not yet been evaluated; if these are pursued, implementation should be cautious and skeptical, accompanied by evaluations to measure whether a theoretically reasonable approach translates to a useful and effective strategy.⁴ Finally, we close with a small number of overarching recommendations.

Scope of Harmful Interpersonal Behavior Problems in the DAF

Despite its attempts to better understand and address the numerous harmful behaviors that affect interpersonal

interactions and relationships, the DAF continues to see many of its Airmen and Guardians experiencing and struggling with these destructive acts:

- Approximately 4.3 percent of women and 0.5 percent of men in the active-duty DAF are estimated to have experienced sexual assault in 2018, the most recent year for which data are available.⁵ Furthermore, sexual minorities are two to nine times more likely to be sexually assaulted than are heterosexual service members and account for 43 percent of all sexual assault victims (Morral and Schell, 2021).
- In addition, 15.4 percent of women and 4.0 percent of men in the DAF are estimated to have experienced sexual harassment each year.
- Approximately 2.7 percent of active-duty DAF personnel experienced racial/ethnic harassment and 3.4 percent experienced racial/ethnic discrimination in 2017, the most recent year for which estimates are available (Daniel, Claros, et al., 2019).
- Although DoD recently began collecting systematic data on the prevalence of hazing and bullying among active-duty personnel, estimates have not yet been released. However, researchers have proposed that both behaviors are not uncommon in each of the services (Stuart and Szeszeran, 2020).
- Estimates of domestic violence perpetration vary widely, but one large-scale study of active-duty DAF personnel found that, in the prior year, 5 percent of men and 3 percent of women had been physically violent against their partners in a way that had an impact. *Impact* was defined as a physical injury or an act that was inherently dangerous (e.g., involved a weapon) (Foran et al., 2011).

Abbreviations

DAF	U.S. Department of the Air Force
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
DoDI	Department of Defense Instruction
GAO	U.S. Government Accountability Office
IRC	Independent Review Commission
OUSD (P&R)	Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness
SAPRO	Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office

In addition, heavy alcohol consumption is considered both a risk factor for harmful interpersonal behaviors and a harmful behavior in itself (Kwan et al., 2020). In the 2018 Health Related Behaviors Survey, a DoD survey for examining service member health and well-being, approximately 24 percent of active-duty DAF personnel reported engaging in binge drinking in the past 30 days (five or more drinks on one occasion among men, four or more drinks on one occasion among women) and 5 percent reported heavy drinking (binge drinking at least one to two days a week in the past 30 days) (Meadows et al., 2021).

Although prevalence estimates for these harmful behaviors tend to be lower in the DAF than in the other military services, numerous DAF personnel are, nonetheless, affected (Breslin et al., 2019; Daniel, Claros, et al., 2019; Meadows et al., 2021). Thus, the DAF has implemented various programs and trainings to address these actions.

DAF Response to Harmful Interpersonal Behaviors

Although a centralized, strategic approach to addressing problematic behaviors has been considered in previous research involving DoD programs (Marquis et al., 2017), DAF leaders have instead taken a multipronged but not centralized approach to preventing harmful interpersonal behaviors in the force. Airmen and Guardians receive training designed to teach the definitions and boundaries of sexual assault, sexual harassment, racial/ethnic harassment and discrimination, bullying, hazing, and domestic abuse. There is variation across topic areas, but training also typically includes information about how to access

DAF leaders have taken a multipronged but not centralized approach to preventing harmful interpersonal behaviors in the force.

support services should an individual experience harmful interpersonal behaviors. Training for each harmful behavior is usually managed and delivered separately by the DAF organization responsible for monitoring, responding, and preventing that behavior. Frequency of delivery varies across behaviors. For example, sexual assault prevention and response training is delivered annually to all service members, but sexual harassment prevention training is delivered as needed, as specified by the commander. Training time is usually limited to one hour or less, and it can be challenging to deliver more-comprehensive prevention strategies within such a time constraint. Nonetheless, there have been efforts to teach bystander intervention strategies to prevent sexual assault and provide support to new parents to prevent domestic violence (DAF, 2020; DoD, 2020), for example. Moreover, DAF leaders have been aggressively pursuing a more-comprehensive and research-driven prevention strategy to sexual assault (OUSD [P&R], 2019).

Currently, there are few resources for those who have perpetrated harmful behaviors and want to stop. Domestic violence is the only behavior for which there is ready access to services for individuals who have perpetrated the harmful behavior and are motivated to discontinue.⁶ More typically, the DAF has managed perpetration punitively—delivering administrative sanctions or, when appropriate, pursuing legal remedies. In fact, the past decade has seen a ratcheting up of punitive approaches to these behaviors. Congress and DoD have implemented and continue to make a number of policy changes, such as establishing a general punitive article under the Uniform Code of Military Justice for sexual harassment (Pub. L. 117-81, 2021, §539D), clarifying policy guidance prohibiting bullying and hazing (DoDI 1020.03, 2020), and seeking to improve the number and success of sexual assault cases that go to court martial (General Counsel of the Department of Defense, 2014). Still, these cases are difficult to prosecute.

Victims of interpersonal violence or harassment have more resources available than do those who have perpetrated harmful behaviors and want to stop.

Often, the necessary level of evidence is lacking, which likely leaves many offenders unpunished and without the support or skills to avoid reoffending.

Victims of interpersonal violence or harassment have more resources available, including informal and formal report processing; victim advocacy; and, in some instances, case management. The access point for these resources differs by type of victimization. Airmen and Guardians who are sexually assaulted can access victim advocacy and support services through installation sexual assault response and prevention offices, which can further provide links to medical and legal support. Victims of sexual harassment, racial/ethnic harassment or discrimination, bullying, or hazing can file a formal complaint or seek support resolving the issue at a lower level through installation equal-opportunity offices. Domestic abuse victims are typically referred to, but can also reach out to, local Family Advocacy Program offices for safety planning, victim advocacy and support, and counseling (Linkh et al., 2008).

Despite the considerable resources and training time devoted to preventing a variety of harmful behaviors, none of these behaviors appears to have declined dramatically. For example, between 2006 and 2018, the percentage of DAF active-duty service members estimated to have been sexually assaulted each year has fluctuated between 2.3 percent and 4.3 percent for women and between 0.3 percent and 0.7 percent for men, seemingly randomly (Breslin et al., 2019). This continuation of negative behaviors is undoubtedly disappointing for the many military professionals and leaders who have invested much of their time in reducing these behaviors and their downstream negative outcomes. It is frustrating, too, for the many DAF service members who must attend, often annually, preven-

tion trainings that appear to have little effect on behaviors and duplicate material they have been exposed to in other settings. This contributes to training fatigue (Rosenthal et al., 2021). In sum, the current approach, however well executed and intended, is not working well enough. Alternatives should be considered.

Conceptual Model Describing the Process Leading to Harmful Interpersonal Behavior

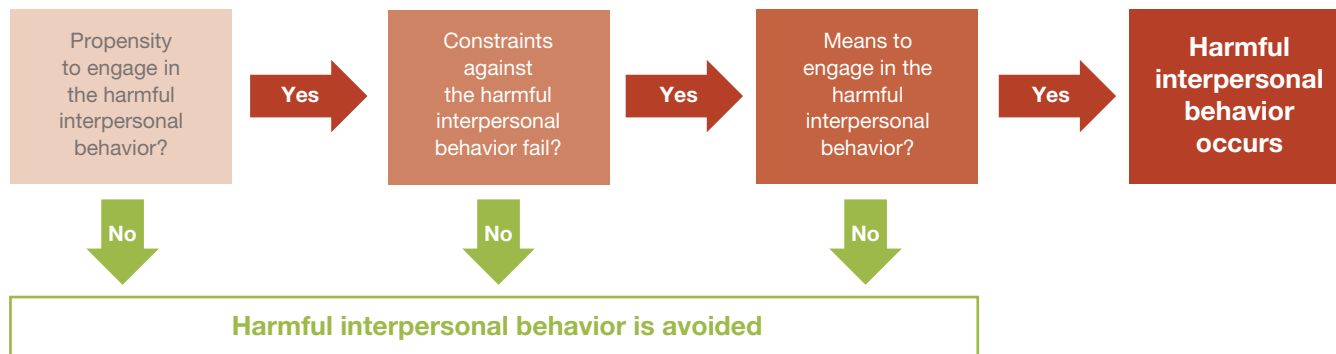
The RAND conceptual model of the process leading to harmful interpersonal behavior depicts the path to problematic behavior as having three off-ramps (see figure) (Marquis et al., 2017). An individual exiting the path at any of these ramps avoids the specific problematic behavior. Unwanted outcomes occur only when circumstances sum to keep the person continually driving forward toward the problematic behavior. In this model, systems have three distinct opportunities to prevent the unwanted behavior

from occurring. As discussed earlier, we use this model as a way to view and understand these behaviors as a possible complement to, not an intended competitor with, other organizing models of behavior.

Propensity to Engage in the Harmful Interpersonal Behavior

First, for a harmful behavior to occur, the individual must have some personal inclination toward or preference for the behavior (i.e., propensity). They may have some degree of positive (or accepting) attitudes about the behavior and may have beliefs that rationalize or even glorify it. On the other hand, a person who lacks the propensity for a specific harmful behavior finds the behavior so offensive or aversive that few circumstances exist that would lead them to engage in it. For example, a person with a genuine respect for all people is unlikely to travel down a road that leads to racial discrimination.

RAND Conceptual Model of the Process Leading to Harmful Interpersonal Behavior



Personal, Social, and Legal Constraints Against the Harmful Interpersonal Behavior Fail

A propensity to engage in a specific harmful interpersonal behavior is not, by itself, adequate to definitively predict future demonstration of the behavior. Even though an individual may prefer to engage in a harmful behavior, other processes can intercede to block them from acting out that propensity. For example, 32 percent of college men indicate that they would sexually assault someone if they could be guaranteed that they would not be punished (Edwards, Bradshaw, and Hinsz, 2014)—that is, have the propensity to sexual assault—but only 6.5 percent self-report that they have sexually assaulted someone in the past.⁷ For many college men, their propensity toward sexual assault is managed before it manifests behaviorally.

One way this can happen is that the harmful behavior is inhibited by a variety of personal, social, or legal constraints. The young men who indicated that they would sexually assault someone if they would not be punished are acknowledging the potential social, administrative, and legal consequences that inhibit their propensity toward sexual violence. Workplace norms and fear of social sanctions from disapproving colleagues may successfully inhibit the behavior of an employee inclined to sexually proposition uninterested colleagues, such that no sexual harassment incidents ever occur.

However, for each of the problem behaviors, there are circumstances that can break the personal, social, and legal control over behavior, even if only temporarily, and that serve to disinhibit the behavior. For example, watching peers, even leaders, engage in hazing or bullying may

provide the stimulus that disinhibits a service member's propensity toward interpersonal violence.

Individual Accesses the Necessary Means to Engage in the Harmful Interpersonal Behavior

Still, even if a person has the propensity to engage in a harmful interpersonal behavior *and* is in a situation in which the constraints that would typically block the behavior have failed, the behavior can still be prevented if the person lacks *the means to engage* in the harmful behavior. For example, a service member who is racially biased (propensity toward racial discrimination) and who has been radicalized by a white supremacy group (disinhibited) may still never racially discriminate against someone in the workplace provided the person is not elevated to a leadership position. That is, for racial discrimination to occur, that person must also have the *means* (authority) to deny a promotion or block a training opportunity (for example).

This model helps explain why harmful interpersonal behavior is not the norm in most populations. In some ways, it takes a perfect storm of circumstances to permit the harmful behavior to occur. For most people, there will be an exit ramp. They will lack the propensity toward that behavior in the first place; their social or legal system will successfully inhibit their behavior; or, even when their preference has not been constrained, they will not be able to access the means that would allow them to carry out the behavior. For leaders and others who are motivated to prevent harmful interpersonal behaviors, this is a hopeful model. It provides three opportunities to intervene and reduce the risk of the behavior occurring.

Prevention Strategies Can Target Each Step in the Process Leading to Harmful Interpersonal Behaviors

The conceptual model just described is a way of understanding the process whereby some people come to engage in the harmful interpersonal behaviors that most other people avoid. Using this framework, it is possible to also think about how our prevention systems could intervene to encourage more people to take the off-ramps that lead to the avoidance of such behavior. The DAF has already implemented a variety of such strategies and may be open to implementing more still.

Address the Propensity of Individual Airmen and Guardians to Engage in Harmful Interpersonal Behaviors

DAF leaders and personnel continue to work to prevent harmful behaviors among Airmen and Guardians. The DAF has been using, and is continuing to consider, various options for addressing the propensity among some personnel to engage in harmful behavior. These strategies include screening out potential recruits who have a propensity to engage in harmful behavior, encouraging those without a propensity toward harmful interpersonal behaviors to select the DAF (given their shared values), and directing additional prevention resources toward Airmen and Guardians who have a propensity to engage in harmful interpersonal behaviors.

Screen Out Some Potential Recruits

As one example of this strategy, the DAF has been considering the use of a screening tool to screen out those who might have a propensity to engage in sexual assault (DAF, 2020). Notably, in recent decades, many civilian employers have used instruments known as *integrity tests* for identifying applicants who might be more likely to engage in negative workplace behaviors (Iddekinge et al., 2012). Potential issues with these tests include test-taker deception and misclassification of employees. The kind of screening tool that the DAF is considering has many similarities to integrity tests, and, therefore, the limitations of integrity tests should be considered when reviewing a screening tool involving harmful behaviors.

Specifically, *faking good*, or respondents providing misleading responses to appear to be more-suitable employees, is one issue with integrity tests. Individuals who understand or believe that test scores might be used to inform their employment might misrepresent their true attitudes or behavioral inclinations (Guastello and Rieke, 1991; Morgeson et al., 2007). Another issue with these tests is that they are often used to predict relatively infrequent behavior, which is notoriously difficult to predict with any precision. Using these imperfect tests to do so can lead to *misclassification* and unnecessary exclusion of a large percentage of potential recruits who have not and would not engage in harmful interpersonal behavior.

No employment-screening measure is clearly related to likelihood of, for example, interpersonal violence perpetration, and DAF policymakers should examine the extent to which tools might misclassify individuals. Rather than using these tools to screen out individuals, the tools might,

instead, be used to determine relative suitability for certain positions, such as recruiter or trainer (Matthews, 2017).

Discourage Some Potential Recruits from Joining and Reenlisting

At various points during its current recruitment process, the DAF has opportunities to identify individuals who might have a higher proclivity to engage in harmful interpersonal behaviors. Research shows that a strong predictor of future perpetration of aggressive or violent behaviors is having been willing to perpetrate these behaviors in the past (Loh et al., 2005; Tharp et al., 2013), and DAF recruiters actively work to identify whether individuals who have expressed interest in the DAF have ever perpetrated harmful behaviors.

Specifically, after an individual expresses interest in joining, a recruiter will often address prequalification criteria, such as a history of violent behavior or substance abuse, with the person. Those who have a documented history of behaviors that would disqualify them do not tend to continue to the formal screening process. Later, a recruiter will determine eligibility for the DAF through completion of formal prescreening forms (e.g., Directives Division Form 2807-2) for the applicant. Among other things, these forms address mental health conditions that may disqualify one from service, such as drug or alcohol abuse, and these factors may also be related to engagement in other harmful behaviors (Parkhill and Abbey, 2008). Furthermore, the U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command collects more-detailed psychological and behavioral information at a later stage in the process.

Throughout the recruitment process, recruiters also communicate the norms and expectations of the DAF,

including lack of tolerance for unprofessional and violent behavior among service members. This information may discourage individuals who are inclined to engage in such behavior from joining the DAF and dissuade others from misbehavior. Although the impacts are unknown, these forms and processes might screen out many who are likely to engage in harmful behaviors.

Notably, previous RAND research proposed that, to better communicate organizational norms and expectations and screen out individuals who might be more likely to perpetrate sexual assault, specifically, DAF personnel should provide additional information to recruits that explicitly addresses the department's intolerance for sexual assault and should ask recruits whether they have a history of sexual assault perpetration, screening out those who do (Matthews, 2017). Similarly, more-specific information on and questions about other harmful interpersonal behaviors might also be implemented.

Targeted Training for People Who Are More Likely to Engage in Harmful Interpersonal Behaviors

Thus far, we have focused on the use of processes and tools to screen out individuals who might have a propensity to engage in harmful behaviors. The DAF might also, or alternatively, use tools to determine which individuals have a propensity to engage in a harmful behavior, then try to reduce that propensity so that harmful behavior becomes less likely in the future. This training might focus on high-risk groups, such as those who have previously engaged in harmful interpersonal behaviors.

Currently, the DAF administers an assessment during Basic Military Training that addresses behavioral issues, such as anger, history with police, behavioral problems

in high school, substance abuse, and history of theft or destruction of property (Garb, Wirick, and Wood, 2012). Rather than screening trainees out, this assessment is used to identify those who might be at risk for future harmful behaviors. DAF personnel use responses to this questionnaire to determine what, if any, recommendations and referrals certain trainees might need.

Another potential use for this or a similar assessment could be to provide those who appear to have a greater likelihood of engaging in harmful interpersonal behaviors, based on their responses within the questionnaire, with more-extensive training addressing these behaviors. However, a challenge to this approach is that many programs intended to reduce harmful interpersonal behavior have either not been evaluated or have not been shown to be effective. Therefore, the DAF should proceed cautiously by starting with training that is consistent with best practices in prevention (Nation et al., 2003) and commit to subsequently evaluating the effectiveness of this training for the targeted population. For prevention strategies that are offered to some Airmen and Guardians and not others, it will also be important to consider and monitor the potential negative effects (e.g., stigma) of certain individuals being identified as in need of this training.⁸

Strengthen the Personal, Social, and Legal Constraints That Limit Harmful Interpersonal Behaviors

A second avenue for reducing harmful behaviors is to identify and strengthen the peer behaviors, norms, situations, or contexts that constrain harmful behavior among people with a propensity to engage in it. The recent Independent

Review Commission (IRC) on Sexual Assault in the Military report highlighted this element of prevention (Rosenthal et al., 2021). Broadly, our society's social and legal constraints seem to successfully prevent problem behaviors most of the time, but DAF leaders, policymakers, and personnel must find ways to expand this inhibitory control into even more settings and periods. For example, over the past 60 years, new legal prohibitions and changing workplace norms have seemed to reduce sexual harassment in the U.S. workplace. Nonetheless, in some military groups, sexual harassment remains common (Matthews et al., 2021; Rosenthal et al., 2021).

Peer Norms and Constraints

Research suggests that perceived peer support for a specific harmful interpersonal behavior is associated with engagement in the behavior. For example, perceived peer support for sexual assault is linked to its perpetration (Tharp et al., 2013), and peer support for domestic violence is also associated with domestic violence perpetration (Capaldi et al., 2012). Furthermore, support for hazing and bullying among groups of service members can contribute to the continuation of these harmful behaviors (Wadham, 2017). Some military units might even rationalize hazing as an activity that promotes unit cohesion and bonding (Keller et al., 2015). Peer response to and condonation of substance use and abuse also appear to influence service members' beliefs and behaviors involving alcohol and drug misuse (Sirratt, Ozanian, and Traenkner, 2012).

Conversely, social disapproval of and opposition to harmful behavior may hinder engagement in these behaviors by creating a context in which individuals are concerned about the negative social repercussions should

they offend. Peer support for prosocial behaviors may also encourage individuals to engage in positive behaviors, such as prosocial bystander behavior (Murphy Austin et al., 2016). For example, research with U.S. Army soldiers found that a positive unit climate was associated with lower risk of both sexual assault and sexual harassment. Specifically, groups in which members indicated that their units encouraged respectful behavior, provided support to victims of sexual assault or sexual harassment, and discouraged negative behaviors tended to have a lower risk of sexual assault and sexual harassment among both men and women (Matthews et al., 2021). This suggests strongly encouraging service members to actively promote a culture of respect might reduce perpetration of harmful behaviors, as recommended by the recent IRC report on sexual assault in the military (Rosenthal et al., 2021).

To promote attitudes and behaviors among unit members that actively address negative behaviors, DAF leaders and personnel have implemented multiple programs that include information or lessons on peer actions. These include various bystander intervention programs for sexual assault and drunk or drugged driving (Farris et al., 2019) and training that aims to create a culture of respect and inclusion (Air Force Instruction 36-7001, 2019). Despite the wide variety of programs, trainings, and initiatives in place, the evidence that this overall portfolio has substantially influenced peer attitudes and behaviors is limited. Systematic review of the theory on which the programs and trainings are built and evaluation of their implementation and effectiveness is needed. The DAF should revise training programs that do not demonstrate improvements in knowledge or behaviors among those who have attended. Furthermore, to avoid training fatigue, the same training

should not be provided year after year. Rather, training should be alternated with other prevention programs, and booster sessions should be implemented, as recommended by the research. Trainings might be tailored to address peer attitudes more extensively among groups (e.g., installations, career fields, and commands) in which risk appears to be high and, as discussed later, to address leadership actions. Notably, congressional and DAF policies that require training to cover certain topics on a specific schedule will need to be accounted for when refining training material.⁹

Leadership Control

In addition to encouraging subordinate unit members to inhibit harmful interpersonal behaviors, DAF leadership must also actively identify and swiftly address these behaviors. Leaders influence their immediate subordinates and the broader culture and context, such that the influence of a leaders' behaviors is also seen among those individuals with whom the leader may have limited interactions but who are supervised by a leader's immediate subordinates (Schaubroek et al., 2012). That is, leader behaviors have far-reaching effects.

Focusing on potential negative effects of poor leader behaviors, research with U.S. military populations has shown that negative leader behaviors are associated with higher risk of sexual harassment and sexual assault (Matthews et al., 2021). The recent IRC report on sexual assault in the military further highlighted the important role that leaders play in creating a culture and climate that is either tolerant or intolerant of disrespectful and inappropriate behaviors (Rosenthal et al., 2021). Beyond sexual assault and sexual harassment, leadership can also influence other harmful behaviors. For example, poor leader-

ship and a lack of clear and consistent leadership both appear to contribute to a higher prevalence of bullying (Stuart and Szeszeran, 2020), and concerns about negative leadership perceptions of help-seeking can serve as a barrier to seeking treatment for potential alcohol or substance abuse issues (Larson et al., 2012).

Although poor leadership behaviors can increase harmful interpersonal behavior among unit members, positive leadership behaviors appear to substantially constrain various harmful behaviors. Belief that one's immediate supervisor discourages alcohol use is associated with decreased odds of binge drinking among U.S. Marines (Woodruff, Hurtado, and Simon-Arndt, 2018). Perceptions that military leadership make active efforts to stop racial/ethnic harassment and discrimination in units are a strong predictor of lower reported frequency of harassing and discriminatory behaviors (Bergman et al., 2012), even stronger than training or resources for reporting on these behaviors (Larsen et al., 2013). Leaders may also be able to support victims before they have decided to come forward by more frequently and clearly encouraging the use of available reporting mechanisms. U.S. military members who reported active and supportive responses from leadership following disclosure of sexually based military equal-opportunity violations to leadership felt greater satisfaction with the report processing and, subsequently, less emotional distress and greater retention intentions (Daniel, Neria, et al., 2019). If leaders were to clearly communicate to Airmen and Guardians that they value the service that victims perform by elevating these incidents, it may help increase the proportion of incidents that are officially reported.

Actively addressing harmful behaviors and providing support to those who request help can create a climate and culture that substantially reduce harmful interpersonal behaviors and their destructive effects.

When DAF leaders actively address harmful behaviors among service members and provide support to those who request help, it can create a climate and culture that substantially reduce harmful interpersonal behaviors and their destructive effects. To support positive leadership behaviors, the DAF provides leaders with training and multiple resources. For example, training on various related topics is addressed at Officer Training School (Farris et al., 2019), and the DAF provides an online, publicly accessible toolkit for leaders that addresses signs and risk factors for various harmful behaviors and that provides recommended responses, including references to DAF requirements for

response (DAF, undated). Of course, multiple additional training materials and resources are also provided to, or made available to, leadership within the DAF. More broadly, DoD is now including material on diversity and inclusion in leadership curricula (Miller, 2020). However, the effectiveness of these trainings and the extent to which leaders at multiple levels are aware of and use these resources is unclear, and systematic review and independent evaluation of efforts are needed.

For harmful behaviors that are strongly associated with unit climate and leadership tolerance (e.g., harassment, bullying, hazing), the DAF should make policy changes that task commanders with ensuring respectful, professional workplaces and provide rewards for success and consequences for failures. Although this may vary, these changes would likely focus on squadron commanders because they have power to enforce behavior changes and are more likely to be able to observe minor misconduct.

Reduce Alcohol-Related Disinhibition

Acute alcohol intoxication is linked to sexual assault (Abbey, 2011) and domestic violence (Eckhardt, Parrott, and Sprunger, 2015) and may serve to disinhibit these behaviors that would otherwise be controlled. In addition, frequent alcohol intoxication is associated with the development of alcohol abuse problems (Bray, Brown, and Williams, 2013). Preventing heavy episodic drinking (binge drinking) may, therefore, provide a unique opportunity to reduce the risk that service members will develop alcohol abuse problems and, potentially, reduce the number of situations that disinhibit individuals with a propensity to assault romantic partners. There is a robust literature on strategies to prevent heavy episodic drink-

ing (e.g., Knox et al., 2019), and clinical practice guidelines provide a choice among multiple interventions, including brief interventions and intensive treatment options. Building a comprehensive alcohol misuse prevention system, if implemented with fidelity, has a strong chance of reducing the development of alcohol abuse problems in the targeted population but may also reduce sexual assault and domestic violence incidents by avoiding disinhibition of these problem behaviors.

Improve Coping Following Stressful Life Events

Additional factors that may disinhibit harmful behaviors are stressful life events. Individuals with recent stressors may be less able to cope effectively and more likely to engage in harmful behaviors. Examples of stressful life events can include financial strain; changes in job responsibilities; problems with a neighbor, friend, relative, or coworkers; death of a family member or close friend; having a child younger than five years old at home; being the victim of theft; seeing someone killed; and experiencing a serious illness or accident. These stressful events have been found to be associated with a higher risk of perpetration of intimate partner violence, particularly among those with a history of childhood adversity (Roberts et al., 2011); they are also associated with alcohol use, particularly among men (Boden, Fergusson, and Horwood, 2014). Stressful life events and impaired social support are also associated with increased risk of violence (Silver and Teasdale, 2005).

These associations suggest that DAF leaders and personnel should consider strategies that help military health care providers, commanders, and service members themselves identify stress-related issues arising among Airmen

and Guardians. Furthermore, DAF personnel should also provide information and resources that may help individuals better cope with stressful life events. Many examples of such support services already exist (personal financial counselors, new parent support services, behavioral health services, military and family life counselors, and others) and suggest a DAF commitment to helping personnel manage these stressors. An evaluation of DoD nonmedical counseling programs revealed that the majority of recipients experienced less stress and anxiety following the services and that the severity of the problem had also decreased (Trail et al., 2017). However, additional work may be needed to evaluate the effectiveness of such strategies for reducing downstream harmful interpersonal behaviors and, if shown to be useful, to increase awareness and utilization of these services.

Eliminate Access to the Means Necessary to Engage in the Harmful Interpersonal Behavior

Using the conceptual model of the process leading to harmful interpersonal behavior, the DAF has one final opportunity to prevent these behaviors from occurring. For individuals with a propensity to engage in a harmful behavior who are also in a setting that disinhibits their behavior, ensure that they lack access to the means required to engage in the behavior. Means restriction has been an important and effective strategy for preventing suicide (Yip et al., 2012) but has not always been included as a prevention strategy for other harmful behaviors. There may be opportunities to add means-restriction strategies to prevention portfolios. For example, privacy is typically a

necessary precondition for sexual assault. After basic military trainers at Lackland Air Force Base were found to be using private locations, such as laundry or storage rooms, to sexually assault trainees (Committee on Armed Services, 2013), Lackland leadership instituted a “wingman” policy that required basic training recruits to move in pairs, with an assigned paired recruit, with no exceptions. The required presence of a wingman ensured that basic training instructors could not access a private meeting with a trainee without arousing the suspicion of others. For prevention of sexual assault in romantic and sexual contexts, limiting privacy might prove effective but is unlikely to ever be an acceptable policy intervention. In the United States, private encounters are an acceptable, normative, and even required element of dating and socialization.

Privacy restriction could, however, be a useful component of prevention of the hazing and bullying sexual assaults that often occur in the workplace, perpetrated by colleagues (Morral, Gore, and Schell, 2015). The 2021 IRC report on sexual assault in the military (Rosenthal et al., 2021) endorsed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendation (Basile et al., 2016) of *hot-spot mapping*, in which an at-risk, knowledgeable population identifies the unsafe areas of buildings and spaces, followed by corrective measures, such as installing surveillance cameras, increasing lighting, or restricting access. Given the large number of hazing- and bullying-related sexual assaults that occur in the DAF, identifying areas of the workplace in which privacy is adequate to perpetrate an assault and eliminating that privacy may prevent some of these assaults in the future.

Other examples of prevention via restricting access to the necessary means include restricting ready access

to alcohol as a strategy to prevent harmful drinking and alcohol-related problems. Per capita consumption declines when policies are implemented that limit the days or hours of alcohol sales (Popova et al., 2009; Sherk et al., 2018), and increasing the cost of alcohol (usually through excise taxes) also reduces the amount consumed (Chaloupka, Powell, and Warner, 2019). In more-controlled environments, such as college campuses, campus-wide and building-specific bans have been shown to reduce binge drinking and frequent drinking (Wechsler et al., 2001; Wechsler et al., 2002). Interestingly, the reduction in problematic alcohol use associated with restrictions on alcohol access also seems to reduce alcohol-related interpersonal violence (Lippy and DeGue, 2016; Fitterer, Nelson, and Stockwell, 2015). In light of this research, the 2021 IRC report on sexual assault in the military recommended that DoD identify a nonclinical office to develop alcohol-related policy guidance and oversight (Rosenthal et al., 2021).

For those with a propensity to misuse authority, restricting access to leadership roles may reduce access to one path toward harassment and discrimination. Discrimination, in particular, requires that the person have the necessary authority to interfere with someone else's work environment and career progression. Ensuring that Airmen and Guardians who have revealed their propensity to engage in harmful behaviors via a history of bullying, hazing, or harassment (even at the lowest levels) are not promoted into leadership roles could prevent acts of discrimination the individuals might otherwise have engaged in had they been provided the means to do so. This would require reliable tracking of information on perpetration that could be connected across databases.

Overarching Recommendations

In addition to the prevention strategies and policies we have outlined, which seek to directly reduce harmful interpersonal behaviors by intervening with potential offenders, three overarching recommendations could have a less direct but systemically critical influence on the prevention of harmful interpersonal behaviors. First, as DoD and the DAF, specifically, invest in research and analysis to understand how best to prevent these behaviors, committing to widespread dissemination of new knowledge will allow the enterprise to advance more quickly toward a solution. Second, a continued focus on improving victims' reporting opportunities and access to care not only will serve victims but will also allow them to serve the military by highlighting problems that need to be resolved. Finally, we recommend improvements to incident tracking, data management, and integration of systems that track different harmful interpersonal behaviors. We next discuss each of these in more depth.

Commit to Transparency in Evaluation

High-quality evaluation is critical to identification of poorly performing policies, continuous quality improvement for promising practices, and dissemination of the prevention and response strategies that achieve their goals (OUSD [P&R], 2019; RAND Corporation, undated). Although the DAF has invested in evaluation of policies and programs related to interpersonal violence, the results of these evaluations do not appear to be widely disseminated. Anecdotally, there is a reluctance among some program staff to share their program evaluation findings outside their own offices, and very few studies are publicly

discussed (despite reliance on federal funding for their support).

As just one example, in 2015, the DAF awarded a contract to implement and evaluate the effectiveness of Green Dot, a bystander intervention program (Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office [SAPRO], 2018). Since then, in annual enclosures to the DoD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, the DAF has reported publicly on the implementation of Green Dot (SAPRO, 2018; SAPRO, 2019), positive perceptions of the program (SAPRO, 2018; SAPRO, 2020), and their hypothesis that the service would achieve a 30-percent reduction in sexual assault victimization by 2020 (SAPRO, 2018). However, in the years that followed implementation, the results of the outcome evaluation were never shared (SAPRO, 2019; SAPRO, 2020; SAPRO, 2021). A search of academic databases and the gray literature revealed no public disclosure of the program evaluation; reportedly, the office responsible for the evaluation has been reluctant to share the results outside a small circle. The Green Dot evaluation, and limited transparency with respect to findings, is highlighted here only because the scope of the rollout was ambitious, and the results of the planned evaluation were highly anticipated. The reluctance to share findings publicly, however, is not unique to this particular evaluation or to the DAF.

For many types of interpersonal violence, there are few proven prevention strategies. In this context, any knowledge gained through high-quality assessment and evaluations will provide the DAF, DoD, and U.S. prevention communities crucial evidence, updating our best guesses about what strategies are not living up to expectations and which deserve further exploration or even dissemination. Doing so depends on evaluators being permitted to, or

required to, share their results. Even disappointing results, ones that fail to achieve expected gains, will be critical in guiding evidence-based decisions on the use of prevention resources. Transforming practices from a reluctance to share toward an embrace of transparency will depend on at least two factors. First, DAF leadership, starting at the highest levels, must themselves be committed to the value that is gained when program developers and evaluators can build on the lessons others have learned and are willing to risk the disappointment that accompanies failures. Second, DAF personnel involved in prevention efforts must be confident, with the support of their leadership, that studies that show disappointing results will not lead to personal or programmatic penalties. Evaluations showing that a promising strategy has failed to achieve the expected gains are the rule rather than the exception, and such “failures” should be seen as guidance for how best to adjust and try again.

Establish Consistency in Responding to Victims

Thus far, this Perspective has primarily focused on prevention and detection of harmful interpersonal behaviors, with limited mention of victim response or incident tracking. However, responding to victims and better understanding incidents involving harmful interpersonal behaviors are two critical components of addressing these destructive acts. Recommendations addressing these provide a foundation for some of the suggestions already discussed. For example, restricting access to authority for those who have shown a propensity to engage in harmful behaviors requires identifying and tracking these individu-

als over time. Thus, we next provide recommendations for consistency and tracking, which the Secretary of the Air Force would need to initiate.

Open Doors

Service members receive a substantial amount of training over the course of their careers on the policy definitions for various harmful behaviors, which offices to approach for each behavior, and how to connect with these offices. The extent to which they accurately remember this highly detailed information, which they often receive in a lecture-based format, is unclear. In addition, many may feel confused about where to go if they need assistance with more than one harmful behavior (i.e., polyvictimization)—such as being sexually assaulted during a hazing incident (Burns et al., 2014). Ambiguous means of reporting, lack of knowledge about services (even when previously trained), and bewilderment about how to navigate a complex series of offices might negatively affect victim reporting. Diverting resources to creating simplified reporting options rather

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than devoting more resources to developing and providing even more highly detailed trainings on reporting, may help empower victims, better ensuring that they receive the services they need.

Create a Common Front Door

One way to reduce the burden on victims of knowing how to define the behavior they are experiencing and of determining where to go to get help for the specific incident is to create a common front door, such that service members have a single service or location that they can access to learn their options and receive initial assistance for any harmful behavior. Service members in need of services or who are interested in reporting could access the office even if they do not know the specific category of harmful behavior they are experiencing or who is responsible for assisting with that behavior. After accessing this common front door, the personnel providing services should provide a warm handoff, referring service members to an appropriate individual by means of a personal introduction and should, if desired by the service members, follow up later to determine whether they had received the assistance they needed or have any additional questions or concerns. During training, service members would receive information on this single resource, so that, later, they would only need to remember or be able to find that information. Notably, Military OneSource is a single source for free counseling that DoD provides. Because of its purpose and scope, however, OneSource does not offer confidentiality or services for all harmful interpersonal behaviors, cannot provide personal warm handoffs, provides limited follow-up, and has somewhat limited service-specific or installation-specific information for victims.

No Wrong Door

To further assist victims, DAF policymakers should consider also developing a No Wrong Door policy for all harmful behaviors. Using the No Wrong Door approach, a potential victim who is seeking assistance will not encounter a situation in which they are told that they have accessed the wrong office, wrong organization, or wrong installation. Instead, the individual would be welcomed, compassionately triaged, and then personally introduced to the most suitable provider or office and be transferred. The recent IRC report on sexual assault in the military for sexual harassment, sexual assault, and domestic violence recommended this approach (Rosenthal et al., 2021). The No Wrong Door approach may be further extended to include additional harmful interpersonal behaviors. Specifically, DAF policymakers should consider requiring all DAF helping-organization professionals, as part of their job descriptions, to be knowledgeable about the services of and processes for all other DAF helping organizations. DAF policymakers should also consider adding the requirement that all helping professionals be responsible for warm handoffs to the appropriate alternative (or additional) resource. Of course, such added demands on helping professionals must be accompanied by the necessary resources to support the increasing job responsibilities.

An additional approach that civilian victim service providers have considered specifically addresses the technological components of a No Wrong Door approach: a central website or mobile application that catalogs services for all victims (Lim, Greathouse, and Yeung, 2014). This might facilitate provider awareness of and access to needed resources. Using this approach, service providers would register through the platform to help build a database of

available services; victims would then use this database to obtain the services they need. More broadly, a victim-services technology ecosystem might allow service providers to easily share information and facilitate coordination. This system would need to address potential challenges with ensuring privacy, and appropriate outcomes for determining effectiveness would need to be identified and measured.

Track and Link Incidents

Previous research considering how harmful behaviors are tracked within the DoD and whether data systems containing information on different harmful behaviors can be linked found multiple shortcomings among current data systems. For example, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that domestic abuse was separated across two data systems that cannot be linked: the Defense Incident-Based Reporting System and the Family Advocacy Program's central registry (GAO, 2006; GAO, 2010a; GAO, 2010b). The Defense Incident-Based Reporting System addresses incidents involving law enforcement, and the registry addresses forms of violence involving families and intimate partners. Notably, sexual assault is also tracked within its own database, the Sexual Assault Incident Database; another database, the Case Management Tracking System, maintains data on workplace violence. Overall, it is not possible to connect information across different databases, which prevents clear and accurate tracking of behaviors and inhibits understanding of who is affected by different behaviors across their careers.

To establish a more complete understanding of harmful behaviors, DAF leadership should require common

reporting standards across databases, including clearly defined responsibilities for tracking each harmful behavior and standardized data collection of incident-level data, which might include information on the characteristics of potential victims and perpetrators. The DAF should also employ a data-management coordinator to establish processes for identifying unique instances of harmful behaviors across data systems and ensuring that updates are pushed to all relevant agencies.

One difficulty in establishing a more complete picture of harmful behaviors within the DAF is that incidents are often handled at the lowest level, such as by someone's immediate supervisor or commander and that, subsequently, little or no information is recorded. Therefore, later, data on what happened, how it was handled, and whether it was successfully addressed are not available. The DAF should require all supervisors, commanders, and leaders to record all incidents of harmful behaviors, how they were handled, and who was involved. Notably, this might be challenging to implement; supervisors and commanders might be reticent to record incidents that could negatively affect a person's career, including their own.

Conclusion

By first considering the distinct off-ramps to engaging in harmful behaviors and then addressing the different elements that either block or open these paths, DAF leaders and personnel may be able to establish a more comprehensive approach to the prevention of harmful interpersonal behaviors. Furthermore, increased transparency when programs have been evaluated, simplification of access to victim services, and better tracking and linking of incidents could also support improved prevention of harmful interpersonal behaviors. Although we offer these suggestions based on theory and research, they are nonetheless untested recommendations and, as such, should be approached cautiously, with accompanying evaluations to understand whether the suggestions produce meaningful improvements. In keeping with our recommendations, we hope such tests will be shared widely so that both failures and successes can better inform the prevention of harmful interpersonal behavior in the DAF.

Notes

- ¹ Throughout, unless otherwise noted, we conceptualize these behaviors using U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) definitions (DoD Instruction [DoDI] 1020.03, 2020; DoDI 6400.06, 2021; DoDI 6495.02, Vol. 1, 2021).
- ² We focus on this collection of behaviors because it was the focus of a recent DAF task force addressing interpersonal violence (Interpersonal Violence Task Force, 2021; Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs Office, 2020).
- ³ Examples of such models include Douglas and Kropp, 2002; Glanz and Bishop, 2010.
- ⁴ For more complete discussions of how to plan, implement, and evaluate prevention portfolios, see Nation et al., 2003; Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (OUSD [P&R]), 2019; and RAND Corporation, undated.
- ⁵ These proportions are lower than those for the other services but do indicate that almost 4,000 active-duty DAF members were sexually assaulted in one year (Breslin et al., 2019).
- ⁶ Smaller Family Advocacy Program offices may refer to a community provider for this service.
- ⁷ We focus here on those estimated to have committed rape, as described in Anderson et al., 2019.
- ⁸ Quasi-experimental designs that vary material to, for example, address different topics might facilitate examination of potential changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.
- ⁹ On schedules, see, for example, DoDI 6495.02, Vol. 2, 2021.

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About This Perspective

This Perspective describes and applies a conceptual model of prevention to harmful interpersonal behaviors in the Department of the Air Force: sexual harassment and sexual assault, racial/ethnic harassment and discrimination, bullying, hazing, and domestic abuse. Because of the association between these behaviors and alcohol misuse, the authors also briefly review that behavior. Finally, the authors consider current issues with and options for improvement of current prevention efforts and reporting avenues for victims.

The research reported here was commissioned by the Department of the Air Force and conducted within the Workforce, Development, and Health Program of RAND Project AIR FORCE as part of a fiscal year 2021 project, “Research and Analysis Support for Task Force to Address Interpersonal Violence and Threatening Behaviors.”

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About the Authors

Miriam Matthews is associate director of the Workforce, Development, and Health program in RAND Project AIR FORCE and a senior behavioral and social scientist at the RAND Corporation. She conducts research in the areas of political psychology and diversity, and she has published studies on hazing and bullying measurement and prevention, sexual assault and harassment prevention and response, and racial/ethnic harassment and discrimination.

Coreen Farris is a senior behavioral scientist and clinical psychologist at the RAND Corporation. Her research focuses on the measurement and prevention of military sexual assault, sexual harassment, racial/ethnic harassment and discrimination, and intimate partner violence. Her methodological interests are in survey design, program evaluation, and decisionmaking models.

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