



Prevalence and Characteristics of Intimate Partner-Related Sexual Violence in the Active Component

**Findings From the 2021 Workplace and Gender Relations
Survey of Military Members**

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Executive Summary

The *Workplace and Gender Relations (WGR)* surveys are Congressionally-mandated to solicit information about experiences of sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and unwanted sexual contact in the military (10 USC 481). In 2021, the *WGR* survey was also designed to estimate the prevalence of intimate partner-related sexual violence as a form of intimate partner violence (IPV), as recommended by the 2021 Independent Review Commission (IRC) on Sexual Assault in the Military. Currently, the Military Community Advocacy (MCA) office is the designated entity within the DoD to address “domestic abuse, child abuse and neglect, and problematic sexual behavior in children and youth” through prevention, awareness, treatment, and rehabilitation services DoD Instruction (DoDI) 6400.01. Given the seriousness and nature of IPV as an indicator of potentially lethal future behaviors such as homicide at the hands of an intimate partner, understanding the extent of this issue is paramount to maintaining Service member well-being and overall force readiness.

The purpose of this report is to summarize the prevalence and characteristics of intimate partner-related sexual violence in the military.¹ To this end, we analyzed 2021 *WGR* data to estimate the past year prevalence rates of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact among military members as well as to explore the context and outcomes surrounding these experiences. Pursuant to DoDI 6400.06,² we defined intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact as experiences where Service members identified the alleged offender as a current or former spouse, a current or former significant other, or someone with whom they have a child. Based on this definition, the estimated rate of past year intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact was 0.9% for women and 0.1% for men in the Active component. Intimate partner incidents accounted for 11% and 9% of all unwanted sexual contacts experienced by women and men, respectively, which means that approximately 1 in 10 unwanted sexual contacts experienced by Active component members involve an intimate partner (as defined by DoDI 6400.06). Collectively, these findings suggest although intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact involving military members as victims is relatively rare.

We also examined the context and outcomes surrounding the incidents for those who indicated experiencing intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact in the 12 months prior to taking the survey. While data were largely not reportable for Active component men, analyses shed light on the intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact experiences of Active component women. Findings suggest junior enlisted women and racial/ethnic minority women were more likely to experience intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact than women in higher paygrades or non-Hispanic White women, respectively. The context and outcomes surrounding unwanted sexual contact were fairly similar for Active component women regardless of whether

¹ While the Department tracks reports of domestic abuse from civilian spouses of military members, the *WGR* surveys are only fielded to current military members. Therefore, the experiences of civilian spouses of military members are not captured in these analyses.

² Following the issuance of DoDI 6400.06, DoDI 6400.09 established the DoD policy on integrated primary prevention of self-directed harm and prohibited abuse or harm. Pursuant to DoDI 6400.09, DoDI 6400.11 was issued in December 2022 to establish integrated primary prevention policy for prevention workforce and leaders which includes the prevention of domestic abuse.

their experience was classified as intimate partner-related: prevalence of both forms of unwanted sexual contact is higher among junior enlisted women; women who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB); and women who are not currently in a relationship. There were, however, some notable exceptions. The majority of women who experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact indicated experiencing multiple incidents in the 12 months prior to taking the survey, behaviors in line with retaliation in the military workplace after reporting the incident(s) to a DoD authority,³ and sexual harassment and/or stalking before and/or after the incident. Also, notably less ambivalence with regards to intent to remain on active duty was observed among women whose unwanted sexual contact involved an intimate partner compared to those whose experiences did not; women who experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact were slightly more likely to express intent to remain on active duty than those whose unwanted sexual contact did not involve an intimate partner. Additionally, women who experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact in the 12 months prior to taking the survey were also more likely than those who experienced a non-intimate partner related unwanted sexual contact to have experienced unwanted sexual contact prior to joining the military.

Collectively, findings suggest the experience of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact, though rare overall, is persistent when it occurs, spanning multiple incidents and involving multiple harms, which is consistent with the pattern of behaviors constituting domestic abuse. As such, Active component women who experience intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact may be at higher risk for a variety of negative outcomes, which may warrant additional examination of policies, procedures, and support services to ensure military members who experience unwanted sexual contact at the hands of an intimate partner get the support they need to stop the abuse and heal so they can continue to serve in the military to the highest extent that their interests and abilities warrant.

³ While the 2021 *WGR* measures potential retaliatory behaviors in terms of professional reprisal and/or social ostracism military members may experience in their workplace after reporting, retaliatory behaviors in the context of domestic abuse may manifest differently as part of a larger pattern of behaviors to gain and maintain power and control, to include behaviors before and/or following reporting to authorities. As such, our use of “retaliation” in this report should not be interpreted to capture the full spectrum of behaviors survivors of intimate partner violence experience in the vicious cycle of domestic abuse.

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Prevalence and Characteristics of Intimate Partner-Related Sexual Violence in the Active Component

Introduction

Consistent with findings of the 2021 Independent Review Commission (IRC) on Sexual Assault in the Military, intimate partner violence (IPV) frequently overlaps with sexual assault. Roughly 32% of active duty women and 30% of wives of active duty men reported having experienced some type of domestic violence in the form of sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking at some point in their lifetimes (Chen et al., 2021). Additional research on IPV-related sexual assault among women Service members found that women who were sexually assaulted by intimate partners were more likely than those assaulted by non-intimate partners to experience multiple incidents of sexual assault, penetrative sexual assault, stalking, sexual harassment before and after an incident, and a history of sexual assault in their lifetime, suggesting sexual assaults involving intimate partners may be characteristically different than other types of sexual assault in the military (Eliezer et al., 2019).

Even more concerning is that sexual assault in an intimate partner relationship is recognized as a high risk factor for lethality, meaning that it is positively associated with homicide at the hands of an intimate partner. Multiple studies have established that sexual abuse by spouses or intimate partners often takes place as part of a continuum of controlling and coercive behaviors, up to and including in some instances domestic violence homicide (Catalano et al., 2009; Kafka et al., 2020; Kamarck et al., 2019). In fiscal year (FY) 2020 there were 11 confirmed domestic abuse fatalities involving military personnel as perpetrators or victims (DoD, 2021a). Across these cases, a total of seven victims or abusers were known by the Family Advocacy Program (FAP) personnel though any interventions unfortunately did not protect victims or stop perpetrators.

Given the seriousness and potential lethality of IPV, the 2021 IRC made several recommendations to address and combat IPV in the military. Among the recommendations put forth and approved by the Secretary of Defense was the need for the Department of Defense (DoD) to establish a mechanism to track the prevalence of domestic abuse/intimate partner-related sexual assault by collecting information on the victim–perpetrator relationship in the *Workplace and Gender Relations Surveys (WGR)*.⁴ The purpose of this report is to fulfill this IRC recommendation by summarizing findings for intimate partner-related sexual violence in the Active Component⁵ by estimating the past year prevalence rates of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact as well as exploring the context and outcomes surrounding these

⁴See IRC recommendation C.3.b which directs the Department to track the prevalence of domestic abuse/intimate partner related sexual assault.

⁵ Civilian spouses of military members are not surveyed in the WGR and therefore are not included in this analysis; data were largely not reportable for intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact for Reserve component members on the 2021 WGR. Accordingly, this report focuses solely on the experience of Active component military members.

experiences to inform future policies, programs, and procedures to prevent and respond to intimate partner-related sexual violence in the military.

Methods

The Health & Resilience (H&R) Research Division within the Office of People Analytics (OPA)⁶ has been conducting the Congressionally-mandated gender relations surveys of Active and Reserve component members since 1988 as part of a quadrennial (biennial starting in 2010) cycle of human relations surveys outlined in Title 10 U.S. Code Section 481.⁷ The principal purpose of the *2021 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Military Members (2021 WGR)* is to report estimated past year prevalence rates of unwanted sexual contact, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination among military members; to assess attitudes and perceptions about personnel programs and policies designed to reduce the occurrence of these unwanted behaviors; and, to provide assessments of the military's gender relations climate. The sections below briefly describe the survey methodology, survey design and key constructs, and analyses conducted to further our understanding of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact in the Active component.

Survey Methodology

The *2021 WGR* survey instrument and procedures were reviewed by a DoD Human Research Protections official. The Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA), within the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), also reviewed and cleared the data collection in accordance with the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA). OPA received a Certificate of Confidentiality (CoC) from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to ensure respondent data are protected.⁸

The target population for the *2021 WGR* consisted of Active and Selected Reserve⁹ members from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Space Force, National Guard, and Coast Guard. However, this report focuses solely on members of the Active component serving in the DoD, including the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force (including Space Force). Single stage, nonproportional stratified random sampling procedures were used to select and invite participants. Sampled military members were below flag rank and had served in their respective component for at least 10 months.¹⁰ The *2021 WGR* was administered between December 9,

⁶ Before 2016, the Health and Resilience (H&R) Research Division resided within the Defense Research, Surveys, and Statistics Center (RSSC) of the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC). In 2016, the Defense Human Resources Activity (DHRA) reorganized and moved all divisions of RSSC under the newly established Office of People Analytics (OPA). In 2021, OPA was reorganized under the Defense Personnel Analytics Center.

⁷ One exception was in 2014, when the RAND Corporation conducted the *Military Workplace Study (2014 RMWS)* of military members from both the Active and Reserve components simultaneously to provide an independent assessment of unwanted gender-related behaviors in the military.

⁸ This CoC means that OPA cannot, without consent of the participant, disclose information that may identify study participants in any federal, state, or local civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other proceedings.

⁹ The Reserve component population specifically includes members in the Selected Reserve in Reserve units, active Guard/Reserve (AGR/FTS/AR Title 10 and 32), or Individual Mobilization Augmentee (IMA) programs.

¹⁰ The sampling frame for the Active component was developed 10 months before fielding the survey.

2021 and March 3, 2022 to a sample of 706,705 Active component members.¹¹ Surveys were completed by 69,581 DoD members from the Active component, resulting in a weighted response rate of 13.0%. OPA scientifically weighted the survey data so that findings from the survey can be generalized to the full population of Active component members. During this process, statistical adjustments were made so that the sample more accurately reflects the characteristics of the population from which it was drawn. This process ensures that the oversampling within any one subgroup does not result in overrepresentation in the total force estimates and that it is properly adjusted to account for survey nonresponse. Further information on the weighting process can be found in the *2021 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey: Active Component Statistical Methodology Report* (OPA, 2022).

Survey Design and Key Constructs

The *2021 WGR* was largely modeled off of the *2018 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members (2018 WGRA)* and the *2019 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Reserve Component Members (2019 WGR)*. However, substantive changes were made to the survey questionnaire in 2021—as part of the OMB survey clearance process—to reduce survey burden. Most notably, the metric used to estimate the prevalence of sexual assault since 2014 (a 41-item measure of specific behaviors, intent, and mechanisms aligned with the elements of criminal offenses under the Uniform Code of Military Justice [UCMJ] included in the DoD definition of “sexual assault”) was replaced with a five-item measure of unwanted sexual contact used on other DoD surveys.

The term “unwanted sexual contact” used throughout this report refers to a range of sex-related behaviors that constitute elements of offenses prohibited by the UCMJ, including offenses involving penetrative sexual assault (completed intercourse, sodomy [oral or anal sex], and penetration by an object), non-penetrative sexual assault (unwanted touching of genitalia), and attempted penetrative sexual assault (attempted sexual intercourse, sodomy [oral or anal sex], and penetration by an object). Respondents were asked to identify unwanted behaviors that occurred in the past 12 months. The resulting prevalence rate provides an estimated proportion of military members who experienced any of these behaviors, referred to as “unwanted sexual contact,” in the year prior to taking the survey. Further information on the measurement of unwanted sexual contact can be found in the *2021 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Military Members: Overview Report* (Breslin et al., 2022a).

For the purposes of this report, we used the unwanted sexual contact metric in addition to items about the alleged offender to estimate intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact as described below.

Intimate Partner-Related Unwanted Sexual Contact

The ability to estimate the prevalence of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact incidents in the military is a new feature of the *2021 WGR*. The addition of these estimates

¹¹ The DoD did not conduct the planned survey of the Active component in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and a survey of the Reserve component was due in 2021. Accordingly, and consistent with the survey administration updates provided by the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (FY 21 NDAA), the *2021 WGR* was administered to both the Active and Reserve components simultaneously.

provides critical information to the Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP) office, which serves as the lead for the Department's Coordinated Community Response to Domestic Abuse.

IPV, a form of domestic abuse, refers to a range of behaviors, including physical, psychological, emotional, and sexual abuse.¹² In the DoD, response to IPV and other forms of domestic abuse is governed by DoD Instruction (DoDI) 6400.06. Accordingly, understanding the prevalence of intimate partner-related sexual violence in the military is imperative to ensuring that progress is made regarding the prevention of and response to these particular forms of IPV. DoDI 6400.06 defines an "intimate partner" as:

a person who is or has been in a social relationship of a romantic or intimate nature with the alleged abuser, as determined by the length of the relationship, the type of relationship, and the frequency of interaction between the person and the alleged abuser. An intimate partner is informed by, but not limited to, the totality of factors such as: previous or ongoing consensual intimate or sexual behaviors; history of ongoing dating or expressed interest in continued dating or the potential for an ongoing relationship (e.g., history of repeated break-ups and reconciliations). (p. 84)

Correspondingly, to be included in the prevalence estimate for intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact, members who experienced unwanted sexual contact in the past year needed to identify at least one alleged offender as being a current or former spouse, a current or former significant other, or someone with whom the Service member has a child (see Figure 1) for all response options provided on the *2021 WGR*).

¹² Although IPV includes a range of behaviors, the *2021 WGR* was only designed to measure sexual abuse (specifically, unwanted sexual contact). At present, the Department does not conduct a scientific survey that measures the prevalence of other forms of IPV among Service members nor any forms of IPV among military spouses.

Figure 1.
2021 WGR Survey Item Measuring Relationship to Alleged Offender(s)

Relationship to Alleged Offender(s)	Was/Were any of the person(s) who did this to you... Mark all that apply.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your current or former spouse? • Someone you have a child with? • Your current or former significant other (for example, a boyfriend or girlfriend)? • A person you were casually intimate with, but not in an exclusive relationship with? • A friend or acquaintance? • A family member or relative? • A stranger? • Someone from work? • Someone you met on a dating application or website? • None of the above • Not sure

Note. Response options in bold were used to generate prevalence estimates for intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact.

One Situation Definition

Because survivors often experience more than one incident of unwanted sexual contact, the 2021 WGR asked members who indicated experiencing unwanted sexual contact in the 12 months prior to taking the survey to consider the event that had the greatest effect on them or the one they consider to be the worst or most serious. Respondents were then asked specific questions about the circumstances surrounding this experience, including the type of experience, characteristics of alleged offender(s), details and context surrounding the incident, whether they reported the experience, and associated outcomes.¹³ By limiting responses to this one situation, overall burden on the respondent was minimized. Throughout this report when the one situation is discussed it is referred to as the “most serious” situation or the “one situation.”

Analyses

All data presented within this report are estimates with an associated margin of error and confidence interval. For OPA surveys, we use a rigorous 95% confidence interval standard, which indicates that we are 95% confident that the true value falls within the confidence interval range. Statistical comparisons in this report are generally made along a single dimension (e.g., gender) at a time, and responses for one group are compared to the weighted average of the responses of all other groups in that dimension. The results of comparisons generalize to the full Active component population within the margin of error. It is also important to note many

¹³ Of note, respondents were also asked about their relationship to the alleged offender in the one situation; this is a separate survey question than what was used to identify the relationship to the alleged offender(s) outside of the one situation described previously. This is because some people may have experienced multiple unwanted sexual contact events, some involving intimate partners and some not. For the purpose of the prevalence rates, any intimate partner involvement was coded as such. Within the one situation, we focused on those who indicated the specific situation they were describing involved an intimate partner.

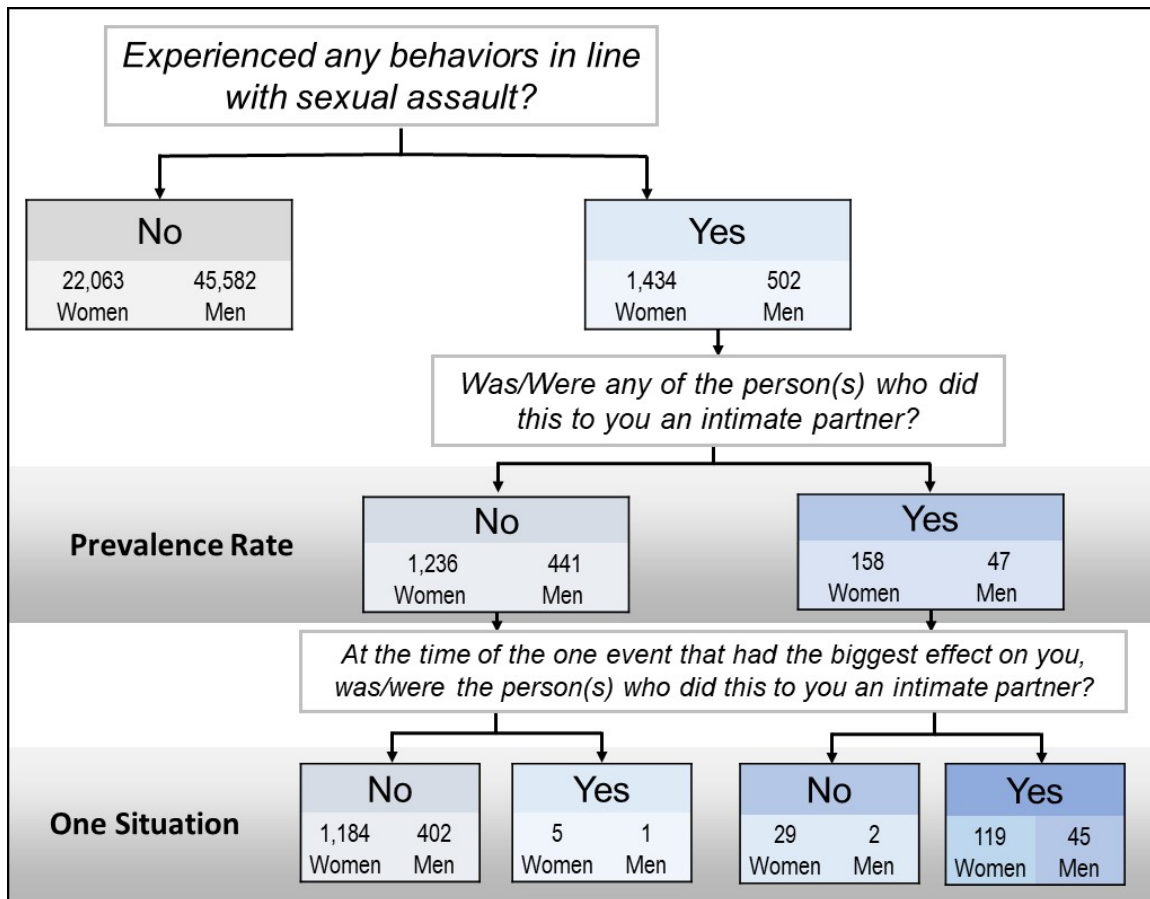
results from our comparative analyses were not significant likely based on the low counts associated with the estimates leading to large margins of error. Thus, non-significant findings in this report should be interpreted with caution, though our significant findings likely reveal a true difference among populations compared.

The annotation “NR” throughout this report indicates that a specific result is not reportable due to low reliability. Estimates of low reliability are not presented based on criteria defined in terms of nominal number of respondents (less than 5), effective number of respondents (less than 15), or relative standard error (greater than 0.225). Effective number of respondents takes into account the finite population correction (fpc) and variability in weights. An “NR” presentation protects the Department, and the reader, from drawing incorrect conclusions or potentially presenting inaccurate findings due to instability of the estimate. Unstable estimates usually occur when only a small number of respondents contribute to the estimate. Caution should be taken when interpreting significant differences when an estimate is not reportable (NR). Although the result of the statistical comparison is sound, the instability of at least one of the estimates makes it difficult to specify the magnitude of the difference. Some estimates in this report might be so small as to appear to approach a value of 0. In those cases, an estimate of less than 1 (e.g., “<1”) is displayed.

Respondents for Comparative Analyses

To determine the types of comparative analyses we could make to better understand intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact in the military, we analyzed the respondent counts associated with the estimated prevalence rates presented previously in Breslin et al. (2022a). For reference, the estimated rate of past year unwanted sexual contact was 8.4% for women and 1.5% for men. Intimate partner-related incidents accounted for 11% and 9% of unwanted sexual contacts experienced by women and men, respectively, resulting in the estimated rate of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact to be 0.9% for women and 0.1% for men in the Active component. Because members may have experienced more than one incident in the past year and had the option to choose the worst incident to elaborate on in the one situation, we also had to consider what type of unwanted sexual contact they were describing in the one situation when determining what additional comparisons could be made. Figure 2 provides an overview of the unweighted counts for past year intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact prevalence rates and discussion of this type of offense in the most serious one situation of unwanted sexual contact.

Figure 2.
Categorizing Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence for Analysis and Associated Counts of Unweighted Respondents by Gender



Note: Respondents who experienced unwanted sexual contact in the past year were asked about their relationship to the alleged offender(s), with their responses reflected in the Prevalence Rate section of the figure above. Respondents who experienced more than one incident of unwanted sexual contact in the past year were also asked about their relationship to the alleged offender(s) in the “one situation” that had the greatest effect on them, reflected in the One Situation section of the figure above. Because some respondents were asked about their relationship to the alleged offender(s) twice, it was possible to provide conflicting answers (e.g., indicating an intimate partner was involved in the one situation, while not indicating an intimate partner was involved in the earlier question). These responses were classified as intimate partner-related for analyses of the one situation results.

As shown in Figure 2, very few male respondents indicated experiencing intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact, rendering additional analyses beyond the prevalence rate not reportable. As such, our comparative analyses focused solely on Active component women. Comparative analyses were conducted to identify differences between groups among Active component women. We first examined group differences within unwanted sexual contact prevalence rates to determine which women were at greater risk of experiencing either type of unwanted sexual contact (e.g., overall and intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact) in the year prior to taking the survey. Next, we compared women who experienced unwanted sexual contact that *did* involve an intimate partner to women who experienced unwanted sexual

contact that *did not* involve an intimate partner to better understand the context and correlates of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact in the military. Table 1 presents the unweighted and weighted¹⁴ counts for both types of comparative analyses. Overall comparisons were made using the prevalence rate counts (left side of Table 1); however, when data were analyzed for the most serious incident, the one situation classification counts were used (right side of Table 1).

Table 1.
Sample Size of Active Component Women by Intimate Partner-Related Unwanted Sexual Contact Comparison Groups

	Unwanted Sexual Contact Prevalence Rate		Unwanted Sexual Contact One Situation	
	Not Intimate Partner N (%)	Intimate Partner N (%)	Not Intimate Partner N (%)	Intimate Partner N (%)
Unweighted	1,236 (89%)	158 (11%)	1,213 (91%)	124 (9%)
Weighted	16,694 (89%)	2,116 (11%)	16,386 (91%)	1,547 (9%)

Results

Below we describe the results from several sets of comparative analyses to better understand intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact in the Active component. In particular, we summarize findings regarding prevalence rates (including demographics and characteristics), characteristics of the most serious one situation (including alleged offender characteristics, context, sexual harassment and stalking in relation to the event, retaliation, and reporting), and additional correlates (including COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions, climate, and retention and readiness impacts).

Intimate Partner-Related Unwanted Sexual Contact

To learn more about the experience of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact among Active component women, we first calculated the prevalence of unwanted sexual contact and intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact by demographic groups for Active component women. Demographic characteristics analyzed included service, paygrade, age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, current gender identity, deployment status, and relationship status. Next, we investigated the type of experience, number of incidents, and alleged offender characteristics among all women who experienced unwanted sexual contact based on whether they identified at least one alleged offender as an intimate partner.

¹⁴ Further information on the weighting process can be found in the *2021 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey: Active Component Statistical Methodology Report* (OPA, 2022).

Demographics

Several demographic differences emerged when examining the experience of past year intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact among Active component women. The demographic patterns for intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact generally followed the same patterns as seen in unwanted sexual contact overall. Specifically, young, early career, enlisted women in the Active component were more likely than their older, higher ranking counterparts to have experienced one or more incidents of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact in the past year. Active component women who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) were also more likely to experience intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact than heterosexual women. Women who reported being in a relationship, cohabitating, and/or married at the time of the survey were less likely than other Active component women to have experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact in the year prior to the survey. This may be counterintuitive, but recall that intimate partners can include former partners as well though our data does not currently allow us to parse out current versus former partners in the creation of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact rates due to how the question was asked (e.g., “current or former spouse” was a single response option). Finally, Air Force Active component women were less likely than women in all other Services to have experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact in the past year. Full results from demographic analyses among women who experienced unwanted sexual contact and intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact in the year prior to taking the survey are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Estimated Past Year Unwanted Sexual Contact Prevalence Rates by Intimate Partner Involvement for Active Component Women

Demographic Category	Unwanted Sexual Contact Prevalence Rates	Intimate Partner-Related Unwanted Sexual Contact Prevalence Rates
Service		
Army	8.4%	0.9%
Navy	10.1%†	1.1%
Marine Corps	13.4%†	1.5%
Air Force	5.5%‡	0.6%‡
Rank		
Enlisted	9.5%†	1.1%†
Officers	3.9%‡	0.3%‡
Paygrade		
E1–E4	12.9%†	1.5%†
E5–E9	5.2%‡	0.5%‡
O1–O3	5.2%‡	0.4%‡
O4–O6	1.3%‡	0.2%‡

Demographic Category	Unwanted Sexual Contact Prevalence Rates	Intimate Partner-Related Unwanted Sexual Contact Prevalence Rates
Age		
20 or younger	19.3%†	2.1%†
21 to 24	11.4%†	1.3%
25 to 30	5.9%‡	0.6%‡
31 to 35	4.1%‡	0.3%‡
36 or older	1.7%‡	0.3%‡
Race/Ethnicity		
White	9.3%†	1.0%
Racial/Ethnic Minority	7.6%‡	0.8%
Hispanic	9.0%	0.8%
Black	7.1%‡	0.9%
American Indian/Alaska Native	15.4%	0.5%
Asian	5.0%‡	0.3%‡
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	4.7%	1.8%
Two or more races	6.9%	1.1%
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	5.7%‡	0.6%‡
LGB	11.3%†	1.4%†
Gender Identity		
Cisgender	6.7%	0.7%
Gender Minority	10.8%	1.9%
Deployment Status in Past 12 Months		
Deployed	10.6%†	1.1%
Not deployed	8.0%‡	0.9%
Relationship Status Collapsed		
In a relationship	7.0‡	0.7%‡
Not in a relationship	11.1†	1.3%†

Demographic Category	Unwanted Sexual Contact Prevalence Rates	Intimate Partner-Related Unwanted Sexual Contact Prevalence Rates
Relationship and Marital Status at Time of Survey		
Married	4.9%‡	0.4%‡
Living with a romantic partner	10.8%†	1.4%
In a committed romantic relationship, but not living together	12.1%†	1.3%
Divorced and not currently in a relationship	8.4%	1.5%
Widowed and not currently in a relationship	2.9%‡	NR
Never married and not currently in a relationship	11.8%†	1.0%
Other or prefer not to say	12.0%†	2.2%

Note: Demographic comparisons were made within each rate and demographic category. † = significantly higher. ‡ = significantly lower. NR = not reportable. LGB = individuals who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual on the survey. “In a relationship” includes individuals who indicated they were “married,” “living with a romantic partner,” and in a committed romantic relationship, but not living together.”

Unwanted Sexual Contact Prevalence Rates by Type and Prior to the Past Year

In order to understand what constitutes intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact, we mapped out experiences based on the relationship to the alleged offender. Recall earlier that we categorized unwanted sexual contact experiences as intimate partner-related based on whether at least one offender in any incident was a current or former spouse, a current or former significant other, and/or someone with whom the survivor has a child. As shown in Table 3, the majority of alleged offenders in intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact were classified as current or former significant others (64%), though a sizeable portion were classified as current or former spouses (32%) and 19% involved someone with whom the survivor has a child. We also examined other potential relationships between survivors and alleged offender(s) (e.g., friend, family member or relative, co-worker), to identify additional contextual information about unwanted sexual contact beyond intimate partner involvement. Findings suggest intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact is also more likely than unwanted sexual contact that did not involve an intimate partner to involve a person the survivor was casually intimate with (27% vs. 11%, respectively) and less likely to involve someone from work (52% vs. 72%, respectively) based on our analyses of prevalence rate data.

Table 3.
Relationship to Alleged Offender(s) for Past Year Unwanted Sexual Contact Experiences Among Active Component Women by Intimate Partner Involvement

	Non-Intimate Partner	Intimate Partner
Relationship to Alleged Offender(s)		
Your current or former spouse	NA	32%†
Someone you have a child with	NA	19%†
Your current or former significant other (for example, a boyfriend or girlfriend)	NA	64%†
A person you were casually intimate with, but not in an exclusive relationship with	11%‡	27%†
A friend or acquaintance	41%	35%
A family member or relative	1%	3%
A stranger	14%	12%
Someone from work	72%†	52%‡
Someone you met on a dating application or website	6%	11%
None of the above	3%†	<1%‡
Not sure	1%†	<1%‡

Note: Comparisons were made between non-intimate partner and intimate partner unwanted sexual contact prevalence rates. † = significantly higher. ‡ = significantly lower. NA = Not Applicable

Our next set of analyses compared multiple aspects of past year unwanted sexual contact among Active component women, using the unwanted sexual contact prevalence rates, based on whether or not the alleged offender(s) of any incident included an intimate partner. In particular, we examined the type of unwanted sexual contact (i.e., penetrative, attempted, or non-penetrative); past experiences of unwanted sexual contact (i.e., prior to joining the military); number of incidents of unwanted sexual contact in the past year; and whether the incidents involved the same alleged offender(s) or different alleged offender(s). Several statistically significant differences emerged with respect to the type of unwanted sexual contact experienced. As shown in Table 4, women who experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact were more likely than women whose unwanted sexual contact did not involve an intimate partner to describe the incident(s) as penetrative (48.9% vs. 27.6%, respectively) and less likely to describe the incident(s) as non-penetrative (12.5% vs. 32.4%, respectively). Moreover, women who experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact were more likely to experience multiple incidents (88% vs. 70%, respectively). Limited differences were observed when examining whether or not the multiple incidents experienced involved repeat offenders. In particular, most women who experienced multiple unwanted sexual contacts in the year prior to taking the survey identified different alleged offenders across incidents, regardless of whether at least one intimate partner is involved (Table 4). Thus, for Active component women who experience unwanted sexual contact involving an intimate partner, the type of offense may be more severe and persistent as well as involve multiple offenders, as also found by Eliezer et al. (2019).

Next, we examined prior victimization among survivors of past year unwanted sexual contact based on intimate partner involvement. A large body of research has demonstrated that prior victimization is associated with future victimization generally (e.g., Breslin, 2022a; Relyea & Ullman, 2017), however, few studies have examined the role of prior victimization in risk for intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact in a military sample. As seen in Table 4, just over 40% of women who experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact in the 12 months prior to taking the survey had also experienced unwanted sexual contact prior to joining the military.¹⁵ This is compared to 28% of women who experienced unwanted sexual contact in the past year that did not involve an intimate partner. This suggests that prior victimization is a particularly relevant factor for understanding military women’s risk of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact, and perhaps even more so than for unwanted sexual contact overall.

Table 4.

Estimated Unwanted Sexual Contact Past Year Prevalence Rate Types, Number of Occasions, Repeat Offender(s), and Prior Unwanted Sexual Contact Rate for Active Component Women by Intimate Partner Involvement

	% Experienced USC in the Past Year	
	Non-Intimate Partner	Intimate Partner
Type of Unwanted Sexual Contact		
Penetrative	27.6%‡	48.9%†
Attempted Penetrative	40.1%	38.6%
Non-Penetrative	32.4%†	12.5%‡
Number of Occasions		
More than one separate occasion	70%‡	88%†
Same Alleged Offender(s)		
Each incident involved the same person(s)	31%	37%
These events involved different people	67%	63%
Not sure	1%†	<1%‡
Prior Unwanted Sexual Contact		
Unwanted Sexual Contact Prevalence Rate Before Joining Military	27.7%‡	41.9%†
Unwanted Sexual Contact Prevalence Rate Since Joining Military (Excluding Past 12 Months)	62.9%	74.1%

Note: Comparisons were made between non-intimate partner and intimate partner unwanted sexual contact prevalence rates. † = significantly higher. ‡ = significantly lower.

¹⁵ The survey did not capture information regarding the alleged offenders of unwanted sexual contact prior to joining the military, so we are unable to say what proportion of these offenses involve repeat offender(s) over time (starting prior to military service and continuing during military service).

Characteristics of the Most Serious Unwanted Sexual Contact One Situation

We then leveraged data regarding the most serious unwanted sexual contact one situation to better understand the nature and outcomes of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact. In the most serious one situation, respondents were asked detailed questions about the circumstances surrounding their experience, including the type of experience, characteristics of alleged offender(s), details and context surrounding the incident, whether they reported the incident, and associated outcomes. For these comparative analyses, one situation data were used as opposed to prevalence data to determine whether the most serious incident involved an intimate partner given that we learned in our prevalence rate analyses that intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact often occurred over multiple incidents and involving multiple people in the year prior to taking the survey. This allowed us to focus specifically on experiences involving an intimate partner as described by respondents when detailing the most serious incident as many respondents indicated multiple experiences and had the choice of what incident to discuss in the one situation.¹⁶

Alleged Offender Characteristics for Most Serious Incident

As shown in Table 5, several statistically significant differences emerged in the characteristics of the incidents based on whether at least one intimate partner was involved. Most notably, Active component women who experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact were less likely than women whose unwanted sexual contact did not involve an intimate partner to identify at least one alleged offender as another military member (73% vs. 93%, respectively), at the same or higher rank (69% vs. 83%, respectively), and in the same unit (39% vs. 65%, respectively) in the one situation. Conversely, women who experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact were more likely than women whose unwanted sexual contact did not involve an intimate partner to identify at least one military member at the same or higher rank outside of their unit (37% vs. 22%, respectively) as an alleged offender in the one situation. Thus, intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contacts appear less likely to involve other military members; but when they do, these incidents are slightly more likely to involve same or higher ranking military members from other units, which suggests these are current or former dual military couples. Furthermore, women who experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact were more likely than whose unwanted sexual contact did not involve an intimate partner to note that their offenders did not fall into any of the categories specified in the survey, as indicated by responses of “none of the above.” This finding suggests that these incidents likely involved non-DoD affiliated civilians as the alleged offender(s). It is also important to note, however, that even though intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact is less likely to involve other military members than unwanted sexual contact not involving an intimate partner, still approximately three out of four of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact incidents

¹⁶ For example, an individual may have experienced multiple unwanted sexual contact events in the past year, including one involving an intimate partner and one not involving an intimate partner. In the preceding section, this person is “counted” as having experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact. However, in the “one situation” section of the survey, the individual may have chosen to describe their most serious unwanted sexual contact incident as one that did not involve an intimate partner. The relationship to the alleged offender is asked twice (overall to generate prevalence rates and specific to the most serious event described in the one situation) to clarify these relationships. Thus, the results regarding relationship to the offender are not equivalent between the two sections of the survey.

do involve other military members. As such, military on military incidents are still of great concern, though it is also important to screen for and consider what types of response and support are needed for intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact when the alleged offender is outside of the military's purview as well.

Table 5.
Reported Characteristics of the Alleged Offender(s) in the Most Serious Incident Among Active Component Women by Intimate Partner Involvement

Reported Characteristics of the Alleged Offender(s)	Non-Intimate Partner	Intimate Partner
Gender of Alleged Offender(s)		
All men	92%	90%
All women	1%	5%
A mix of men and women	5%	NR
Not sure	2%	NR
At least one was a woman	6%	10%
At least one was a man	97%	95%
Alleged Offender(s) Affiliation		
At least one was a military member	93% [†]	73% [‡]
All were military members	85% [†]	53% [‡]
Some were military members, but not all	7% [‡]	20% [†]
None were military	5% [‡]	27% [†]
Not sure	2%	<1%
Alleged Offender(s) Status		
At least one was in chain of command	23%	23%
Your immediate military supervisor	14%	14%
Someone else in your chain of command (excluding your immediate military supervisor)	15%	15%
At least one was same rank or higher	83% [†]	69% [‡]
At least one was in your unit	65% [†]	39% [‡]
Some other higher ranking military member in your unit	27% [†]	16% [‡]
Military member of the same rank as you in your unit	34% [†]	21% [‡]
Some other higher ranking military member not in your unit	17%	22%
Military member of the same rank as you not in your unit	22% [‡]	37% [†]
Subordinate(s) or someone you manage as part of your military duties	7%	6%
DoD/government civilian(s) working for the military	5%	6%
Contractor(s) working for the military	2%	11%
None of the above	9% [‡]	30% [†]
Not sure	6%	4%

Reported Characteristics of the Alleged Offender(s)	Non-Intimate Partner	Intimate Partner
Relationship to Alleged Offender(s) at Time of Survey		
Your current or former spouse	<1%	38%†
Someone you have a child with	<1%	20%†
Your current or former significant other (for example, a boyfriend or girlfriend)	<1%	61%†
A person you were casually intimate with, but not in an exclusive relationship with	7%	15%
A friend or acquaintance	38%†	20%‡
A family member or relative	<1%	NR
A stranger	12%	11%
Someone from work	69%†	41%‡
Someone you met on a dating application or website	5%	8%
None of the above	4%†	NR
Not sure	3%†	NR

Note: Comparisons were made between non-intimate partner and intimate partner unwanted sexual contact prevalence rates. † = significantly higher. ‡ = significantly lower. NR = not reportable.

Context of Most Serious Incident

Table 6 presents the context of the unwanted sexual contact for the most serious incident for events based on whether the event involved an intimate partner. First, consistent with the pattern for overall prevalence rates by type, Active component women who experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact were more likely than women whose unwanted sexual contact did not involve an intimate partner to describe the most serious incident as a penetrative offense (47% vs. 27%, respectively) and less likely to describe it as a non-penetrative offense (12% vs. 36%, respectively).

Next, the 2021 WGR sought to establish whether transition periods such as entering a unit or preparing to leave a unit are higher risk periods for experiencing unwanted sexual contact. The findings revealed that these transitions are indeed periods of risk for military members, however, minimal differences emerged between non-intimate partner and intimate partner-involved unwanted sexual contact. This suggests that risk during transitions is not unique to non-intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact events as individuals are also at heightened risk of experiencing intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact during these periods of increased stress.

Finally, there were also no differences in labeling the incident as sexual assault. This is somewhat surprising given that so few of the intimate partner unwanted sexual contact experiences were non-penetrative. However, these findings suggest that individuals may not label even an unwanted attempted penetrative or penetrative experience as a sexual assault when the alleged offender is an intimate partner. This may have implications for their willingness to report these instances as well.

Table 6.
Context of the Most Serious Incident for Active Component Women by Intimate Partner Involvement

Context in Which the Unwanted Sexual Contact Occurred	Non-Intimate Partner	Intimate Partner
Most Serious Type of Unwanted Sexual Contact		
Penetrative	27%‡	47%†
Attempted Penetrative	37%	41%
Non-Penetrative	36%†	12%‡
New or Preparing to Leave Unit		
Occurred when you were new to the unit or preparing to leave the unit	44%	40%
New to the unit (i.e., arrived within the prior 120 days)	35%	25%
Preparing to leave the unit (e.g., change of station, transferring, separating)	13%	16%
Occurred when alleged offender(s) were new to the unit (i.e., arrived within prior 120 days)	16%	15%
Occurred when alleged offender(s) were preparing to leave the unit	23%	16%
Label Incident as Sexual Assault		
Yes	68%	71%
No	32%	29%

Note: Comparisons were made between non-intimate partner and intimate partner unwanted sexual contact prevalence rates. † = significantly higher. ‡ = significantly lower.

Sexual Harassment and Stalking in Relation to the Most Serious Incident

As seen in Table 7, minimal differences emerged when examining experiences of sexual harassment and stalking in relation to the most serious incident of unwanted sexual contact by whether the incident involved at least one intimate partner. However, women who experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact were more likely than women whose unwanted sexual contact did not involve an intimate partner to indicate they were stalked after the incident (39% vs. 23%, respectively), which again points to an increased severity and pattern of abuse that warrants further attention. Otherwise, the experience of sexual harassment and stalking in relations to the incident were very similar regardless of intimate partner involvement. This continues to suggest targeting sexual harassment and stalking could be a way to decrease all forms of unwanted sexual contact; however more work is needed to encourage members to come forward and report their experiences as a means of potentially preventing more serious harm down the road.

Table 7.
Sexual Harassment and Stalking Before and/or After the Most Serious Incident for Active Component Women by Intimate Partner Involvement

Sexual Harassment and Stalking Before and/or After	Non-Intimate Partner	Intimate Partner
Experienced Sexual Harassment and Stalking		
Experienced Sexual Harassment and/or Stalking Before and/or After the One Situation	56%	66%
Sexually harassed you before the situation	39%	51%
Stalked you before the situation	17%	26%
Sexually harassed you after the situation	35%	44%
Stalked you after the situation	23%‡	39%†
Harassing Behaviors Before Unwanted Sexual Contact		
Told sexual jokes or stories	76%	65%
Repeated attempts to establish unwanted relationship, sexual comments, asked about sex life	88%	80%
Touched you in a sexual way or in any way that made you uncomfortable, angry, or upset	81%	89%
Other sexually harassing behavior(s)	58%	58%
Length of Sexual Harassment Before Unwanted Sexual Contact		
Sexual harassment began the same day as unwanted sexual contact	12%	15%
Sexual harassment began before unwanted sexual contact	88%	85%
About one week before	16%	15%
About one month before	21%	15%
A few months before	38%	34%
A year or more before	13%	21%
Sexual Harassment Complaint		
Made a complaint about sexual harassment	38%	42%
Someone in your chain of command	32%	37%
Someone in the chain of command of the offender	13%	24%
Military Equal Opportunity (MEO) staff or office assigned to receive MEO complaints	7%	6%
Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) staff or office (Army only)	24%	NR
Inspector General's office	2%	5%
A military hotline or advice line dedicated to receiving MEO or SHARP complaints	4%	6%
No, I did not make a complaint to any of the above individuals	53%	50%

Sexual Harassment and Stalking Before and/or After	Non-Intimate Partner	Intimate Partner
Made a complaint about sexual harassment <i>before</i> the unwanted sexual contact	8%	11%

Note: Comparisons were made between non-intimate partner and intimate partner unwanted sexual contact prevalence rates. † = significantly higher. ‡ = significantly lower. NR = not reportable.

Reporting the Most Serious Incident

Table 8 reveals minimal differences surrounding reporting the most serious incident of unwanted sexual contact by whether the incident involved at least one intimate partner, though it is worth noting that underreporting remains a significant problem at large among Active component women who experience unwanted sexual contact. However, a significant difference emerged with regards to perceived retaliation¹⁷ as a result of reporting. Specifically, Active component women who experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact were more likely than women whose unwanted sexual contact did not involve an intimate partner to indicate they experienced behaviors in line with retaliation¹⁸ after reporting the incident (88% vs. 65%, respectively). These results may reveal a need for greater support for women who report an intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact to prevent retaliation. There were no significant differences for whether victims reported to a military authority, reporting by whether the victims would label the incident as sexual assault, or type of report made.

¹⁷ The estimates presented in this report reflect Service members' perceptions about a negative experience associated with their reporting of unwanted sexual contact and not necessarily a reported or legally substantiated incident of retaliation. Rates should not be construed as a legal crime victimization rate due to slight differences across the Services on the definition of behaviors and the requirements of retaliation, and the absence of official information regarding an investigation. Moreover, while the 2021 WGR measures potential retaliatory behaviors in terms of professional reprisal and/or social ostracism military members may experience in their workplace after reporting, retaliatory behaviors in the context of domestic abuse may manifest differently as part of a larger pattern of behaviors to gain and maintain power and control, to include behaviors before and/or following reporting to authorities. As such, our use of "retaliation" in this report should not be interpreted to capture the full spectrum of behaviors survivors of IPV experience in the vicious cycle of domestic abuse.

¹⁸ Our use of "behaviors in line with retaliation" is distinguished from the official retaliation rates as reported in Breslin et al. (2022a). Given the small sample sizes, we were not able to apply the legal criteria used to generate official retaliation prevalence rates; thus, we instead report whether at least one behavior was experienced in line with retaliation without legal criteria applied to glean some information about potential experiences of retaliation.

Table 8.***Reporting of the Most Serious Incident for Active Component Women by Intimate Partner Involvement***

Reporting of Unwanted Sexual Contact	Non-Intimate Partner	Intimate Partner
Reported to Military Authority		
Yes	33%	31%
No	67%	69%
Reported by Those Who Would Label Incident as Sexual Assault		
Yes	60%	61%
No	40%	39%
Negative Outcomes of Reporting Unwanted Sexual Contact: Perceived Retaliation		
Experienced behavior(s) in line with retaliation	65%‡	88%†
Did not experience	35%†	12%‡
Reporting Type		
A restricted report	20%	13%
An unrestricted report	66%	75%
Unsure what type of report you initially made	13%	12%

Note: Comparisons were made between non-intimate partner and intimate partner unwanted sexual contact prevalence rates. † = significantly higher. ‡ = significantly lower. NR = not reportable.

We also examined reasons for not reporting among those who did not report the incident to a military authority based on whether or not an intimate partner was involved. As shown in Table 9, no significant differences emerged regarding reasons for not reporting the unwanted sexual contact incident by whether the incident involved at least one intimate partner. However, as stated above, more work is needed to encourage members to come forward and report their experiences as a means of potentially preventing more serious harm down the road as well as to ensure survivors are given the support they need to recover.

Table 9.
Reasons for Not Reporting the Most Serious Incident for Active Component Women by Intimate Partner Involvement

Reasons for Not Reporting Unwanted Sexual Contact	Non-Intimate Partner	Intimate Partner
You thought it was not serious enough to report.	43%	51%
You did not think your report would be kept confidential.	36%	36%
You did not think anything would be done.	54%	48%
You did not trust the process would be fair.	44%	38%
You thought you might get in trouble for something else you did.	17%	20%
You thought it might hurt your performance evaluation/fitness report or your career.	28%	29%
Worried about potential negative consequences from the person(s) who did it.	38%	45%
Worried about potential negative consequences from military supervisor/someone in chain of command.	37%	29%
Worried about potential negative consequences from your military coworkers or peers.	48%	37%
Some other reason	27%	43%

Note: Comparisons were made between non-intimate partner and intimate partner unwanted sexual contact prevalence rates. † = significantly higher. ‡ = significantly lower.

Additional Correlates of Intimate Partner-Related Unwanted Sexual Contact

Next, we examined the experience of past year unwanted sexual contact by intimate partner involvement with regards to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic response, workplace climate, and readiness and retention outcomes to determine whether women whose unwanted sexual contact experience involved an intimate partner differed from those who did not on these other key metrics from the 2021 WGR. The comparisons in the following section use the overall prevalence rates for unwanted sexual contact to identify differences based on intimate partner involvement (i.e., these data are not specific to the “one situation” of greatest impact).

COVID-19 Pandemic-Related Restrictions

Due to the ongoing pandemic, the 2021 WGR asked about COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions in order to understand how these may relate to the experience of unwanted sexual contact. Findings from COVID-19 pandemic restrictions for Active component women who experienced unwanted sexual contact in the year prior to taking the survey by intimate partner involvement are shown in Table 10. Collectively, most women who experienced past year unwanted sexual contact reported being personally affected by one or more pandemic-related restrictions, including restrictions from attending social gatherings, requirements to social distance at work, and restrictions from visiting off-base establishments. Surprisingly, however, no differences emerged based on whether the unwanted sexual contact experienced involved an

intimate partner. Given that IPV occurs between intimate partners, there is an assumption that individuals who may live with or otherwise share close quarters with potential offenders such as intimate partners living in the home would be at greater risk of experiencing unwanted sexual contact; however, this did not appear to be the case for Active component women, though it is also important to note we found when multiple incidents occur, different alleged offenders are often involved across incidents as well regardless of intimate partner status.

Table 10.
COVID-19 Pandemic-Related Restrictions for Active Component Women Who Experienced Past Year Unwanted Sexual Contact by Intimate Partner Involvement

Covid-19 Pandemic-Related Restrictions	Non-Intimate Partner	Intimate Partner
Orders to remain at home		
Not at all	38%	28%
Moderate/small extent	45%	47%
Large extent	17%	25%
Restrictions from leaving your military installation or ship		
Not at all	41%	45%
Moderate/small extent	37%	30%
Large extent	22%	24%
Restrictions from visiting off-base establishments		
Not at all	22%	20%
Moderate/small extent	38%	39%
Large extent	39%	41%
Restrictions from visiting on-base establishments		
Not at all	34%	26%
Moderate/small extent	44%	48%
Large extent	22%	26%
Restrictions from attending social gatherings of a certain size (for example, 10 or more)		
Not at all	18%	16%
Moderate/small extent	42%	38%
Large extent	41%	46%
Having to primarily work from home		
Not at all	65%	59%
Moderate/small extent	26%	29%
Large extent	9%	12%
Requirements to social distance while you were at work		
Not at all	23%	16%
Moderate/small extent	42%	45%
Large extent	35%	38%
A personal decision to avoid social gatherings with friends, peers, or coworkers		
Not at all	31%	22%
Moderate/small extent	42%	47%
Large extent	27%	31%
Average number of restrictions impacting military member	3.8	3.8

Note: Comparisons were made between non-intimate partner and intimate partner unwanted sexual contact prevalence rates. † = significantly higher. ‡ = significantly lower.

Workplace Climate

Workplace climate is integral to a healthy, resilient, and ready force, and has been shown to be related to a variety of harmful behaviors in the military, including unwanted sexual contact (Breslin et al., 2019; Breslin et al., 2020). To better understand how climate relates to intimate partner-related sexual violence in the military, we investigated associations between several climate indicators and unwanted sexual contact separately based on whether or not an intimate partner was involved in the experience of unwanted sexual contact. As seen in Table 11, no differences emerged when examining key workplace climate indicators from the 2021 WGR based on whether past year unwanted sexual contact experienced involved an intimate partner. In particular, none of the measures concerning unit responsibility and intervention,¹⁹ workplace hostility,²⁰ psychological climate for sexual harassment,²¹ leadership support for intervention,²² and perceptions of sexual assault and harassment in the military over the last two years were significantly different based on whether unwanted sexual contact experienced in the year prior to the survey involved an intimate partner. Thus, the similar relationships we see between unwanted sexual contact and workplace climate indicators exist regardless of whether an intimate partner is involved in the experience. Intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact experiences were more likely to involve alleged offenders outside of the unit and even the military, and thus are less clearly a direct result of climate within the unit. However, recall three fourths of incidents still involved another military member. These findings suggest that the association between unwanted sexual contact and unit climate may not always be straightforward, and climate may serve as a proxy for other “third variables” that are not directly measured, but are associated with risk for unwanted sexual contact of any form (e.g., military culture at large and/or unit demographic characteristics such as age, military occupational specialty, or installation).

¹⁹ The Unit Responsibility and Intervention scale contains two items that assesses the extent to which members perceive those in their unit promote dignity and respect as well as whether they refrain from sexist comments or behaviors (Breslin et al., 2022b). Responses were measured on a five-point scale ranging from not at all (1) to very large extent (5). Responses were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater perceptions of responsibility and intervention among unit members.

²⁰ The Workplace Hostility scale contains nine items which assess the degree to which individuals in the workplace act in an angry or hostile manner toward others in the workplace (Breslin et al., 2022b; Ormerod et al., 2001; Seldon & Downey, 2012). Response options ranged from never (1) to very often (5). Responses were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater workplace hostility in the unit.

²¹ The Psychological Climate for Sexual Harassment (PCSH) is a nine-item scale that assesses the level of tolerance for sexual harassment in the workplace (Estrada et al., 2011). Responses were provided on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), then averaged across the nine items where a higher score indicates a workplace climate less tolerant of sexual harassment.

²² The Leadership Support for Intervention scale contains five items that measure the extent to which members’ perceive their immediate supervisor encourages bystander intervention to prevent harmful behaviors (Breslin et al., 2022b). Responses were provided on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Responses were averaged with higher scores indicating greater support from leaders for bystander intervention.

Table 11.
Workplace Climate Indicators for Active Component Women Who Experienced Past Year Unwanted Sexual Contact by Intimate Partner Involvement

Workplace Climate Indicators	Non-Intimate Partner	Intimate Partner
Unit Responsibility and Intervention Scale	2.7	2.9
Workplace Hostility Scale	2.6	2.7
Psychological Climate for Sexual Harassment (PCSH) Scale	2.8	2.7
Leader Support for Intervention Scale	3.5	3.6
Trust military system to protect your privacy.		
Agree	20%	19%
Neither	24%	19%
Disagree	56%	61%
Trust military system to ensure your safety following the incident.		
Agree	23%	27%
Neither	25%	18%
Disagree	52%	54%
Trust military system to treat you with dignity and respect.		
Agree	24%	22%
Neither	25%	26%
Disagree	50%	51%
Sexual harassment in military more or less of a problem over the last 2 years		
Less of a problem today	6%	8%
About the same as 2 years ago	33%	35%
More of a problem today	37%	33%
Do not know	25%	25%
Sexual assault in the military more or less of a problem over the last 2 years		
Less of a problem today	5%	6%
About the same as 2 years ago	32%	39%
More of a problem today	37%	29%
Do not know	26%	27%

Note: See Breslin et al., 2022b for a detailed description of each scale. Comparisons were made between non-intimate partner and intimate partner unwanted sexual contact prevalence rates. † = significantly higher. ‡ = significantly lower.

Other Problematic Behaviors Associated with Intimate Partner Violence

Other problematic behaviors, including sexual harassment and gender discrimination are often associated with unwanted sexual contact in the military as well and may exacerbate its impact on force health, resilience, and readiness. Little is known, however, if these experiences vary by whether unwanted sexual contact involves an intimate partner. Therefore, we sought to

determine relationships between any of these behaviors and intimate partner involvement in the experience of unwanted sexual contact. As shown in Table 12, and consistent with the results regarding climate described in the prior section, minimal differences in experiencing other problematic behaviors were observed based on whether unwanted sexual contact experienced in the past year involved an intimate partner. However, the relationship among these behaviors and unwanted sexual contact is very strong regardless of whether unwanted sexual contact involves an intimate partner.²³ These results suggest that sexual harassment and gender discrimination are risk factors for both intimate partner and non-intimate partner unwanted sexual contact in the military.

Table 12.
Past Year Rates of Sexual Harassment and Gender Discrimination for Active Component Women Who Experienced Past Year Unwanted Sexual Contact by Intimate Partner Involvement

Other Problematic Behaviors Associated With IPV	Non-Intimate Partner	Intimate Partner
Experienced Sexual Harassment	85.7%	78.4%
Sexually Hostile Work Environment Prevalence Rate	85.6%	78.4%
Sexual <i>Quid Pro Quo</i> Prevalence Rate	18.1%	29.7%
Gender Discrimination Prevalence Rate	40.3%	40.6%

Note: See Breslin et al. (2022a) for a detailed description of prevalence rate construction. Comparisons were made between non-intimate partner and intimate partner unwanted sexual contact prevalence rates. † = significantly higher. ‡ = significantly lower.

Retention and Readiness

Retention and readiness are key outcomes tracked by the Department. Because unwanted sexual contact is a threat to readiness and retention, we sought to determine whether intimate partner involvement exacerbates this threat. The 2021 WGR assessed retention intentions and perceived resilience as a proxy for retention and readiness in the military.²⁴ As shown in Table 13, minimal differences in retention intentions and resilience were observed based on whether unwanted sexual contact experienced in the past year involved an intimate partner for women in the Active component. Notably greater ambivalence with regards to intent to remain on active duty was observed among women whose unwanted sexual contact in the year prior to taking the

²³ The design of the 2021 WGR does not allow us to determine what percentage of respondents who experienced sexual harassment/gender discrimination and unwanted sexual contact were victimized by the same alleged offender or whether different offenders were involved; thus it is unclear whether victims of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact were being harassed and/or discriminated against by their intimate partner (this is less likely in the case of discrimination given the nature of discrimination involving harm to career), or were experiencing sexual harassment and/or gender discrimination by someone from work who was not their intimate partner.

²⁴ The Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) includes six survey items that assess members' perceptions of their ability to bounce back quickly after hard times, stressful events, when something bad happens, or setbacks (Smith et al., 2008). Responses range from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Responses were averaged to produce a total resilience score, with higher scores indicating more resilient individuals.

survey did not involve an intimate partner compared to those whose experiences did (11% vs. 19%, respectively).

Table 13.
Retention and Readiness for Active Component Women Who Experienced Past Year Unwanted Sexual Contact by Intimate Partner Involvement

Retention and Readiness	Non-Intimate Partner	Intimate Partner
Retention Intentions		
Likely to remain on active duty	34%	45%
Neither likely nor unlikely to remain on active duty	19% [†]	11% [‡]
Unlikely to remain on active duty	47%	44%
Brief Resilience Scale		
Average	3.2	3.2

Note: Comparisons were made between non-intimate partner and intimate partner unwanted sexual contact prevalence rates. [†] = significantly higher. [‡] = significantly lower.

Discussion

The goal of this research effort was to develop a greater understanding of IPV in the military as recommended by the IRC through the examination of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact as assessed on the *2021 WGR*. While we had hoped to examine findings for both Active and Reserve component members separately by gender, data for the Reserve component as well as for Active component men were largely not reportable beyond the prevalence rates presented in Breslin et al. (2022a). As such, this report focused on the experiences of women in the Active component.

Collectively, results indicate the prevalence of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact among Active component women is generally low. Most unwanted sexual contact impacting Active component women does not involve intimate partners. The context surrounding intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact is also largely similar to unwanted sexual contacts that do not involve an intimate partner. Prevalence of both forms of unwanted sexual contact is higher among junior enlisted women, women who identify as LGB, and women who are not currently in a relationship, while prevalence is lower among women in the Air Force compared to women in the other Services.

However, some notable differences emerged when we examined the context surrounding unwanted sexual contact by intimate partner involvement. Perhaps unsurprisingly, intimate partner alleged offenders were less often military members than in non-intimate partner unwanted sexual contact offenses; however, the majority were still military members (73%), suggesting that intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact in the military is still primarily a “military on military” phenomenon, at least as experienced by Active component women. These situations typically involved an ongoing, problematic relationship between the victim and the intimate partner/alleged offender. Specifically, most survivors had experienced multiple

incidents of unwanted sexual contact from the alleged offender(s), and many experienced sexual harassment and/or stalking before and/or after the incident of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact, consistent with previous research (Eliezer et al., 2019). Additionally, while the prevalence rate for intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact is relatively small, these cases potentially represent some of the most severe. Sexual violence in the context of an intimate partner relationship is a significant risk factor for lethality, and work to prevent such outcomes continues to be of utmost importance.

Although minimal differences were observed surrounding reporting the most serious incident of unwanted sexual contact by whether the incident involved at least one intimate partner, underreporting remains a significant problem at large among Active component women who experience unwanted sexual contact, a finding that highlights the need for further exploration into barriers to reporting. Additionally, women who experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact were slightly more likely to express intent to remain on active duty than those whose unwanted sexual contact did not involve an intimate partner, and were less likely to report ambivalence in their intent to remain on active duty. Previous research has shown that economic distress in the relationship or home may contribute to the occurrence of intimate partner-related violence, particularly against women (Fox et al., 2002). Accordingly, economic stability might serve as a protective factor for ending the cycle of violence and therefore explain the greater likelihood to remain on active duty for financial purposes. Additional research addressing this question could potentially fill existing gaps in understanding.

Prior sexual assault is a significant risk factor for future sexual assault, as has been demonstrated across multiple military and civilian studies. This was particularly true for intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact, where victims were even more likely than victims of non-intimate partner offenses to have experienced some form of unwanted sexual contact prior to joining the military. This suggests that prior experiences of sexual violence may make individuals particularly at risk for situations involving violence and harm committed by an intimate partner in the future. Thus, more work remains to prevent intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact in the military and ensure prevention and response officials take into account the unique experiences of survivors of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact when designing programs, policies, and procedures to eradicate all forms of unwanted sexual contact from the military.

The findings discussed are not without limitations. While we strived to conduct a robust examination of intimate partner-related sexual violence across the Active and Reserve components and by gender, the low base rate coupled with smaller numbers of respondents on the 2021 *WGR* precluded analyses among Reserve component members as well as Active component men. Additionally, Active component women who experienced intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact indicated multiple experiences by multiple alleged offenders in the year prior to taking the survey; however, we were unable to determine the exact nature of the intimate partner relationship in terms of whether the alleged offender(s) were current versus former partners. A large body of literature on IPV-related sexual violence suggests that often former partners are involved (Catalano, 2012; Sorenson & Spear, 2018), which may explain some of the surprising findings regarding current relationship status and intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact, though additional modifications to *WGR* survey questions would be needed in the future to explore more fully. Moreover, we do not know if incidents of unwanted

sexual contacts prior to military service involved the same intimate partner as those that occurred in the year prior to taking the survey, though this information could be useful in understanding the longevity of IPV-related sexual violence and identifying appropriate support mechanisms to break the cycle. Finally, as with all cross-sectional survey data, we are unable to determine causal relationships among the groups tested on the constructs examined. Longitudinal data would shed light on the temporal ordering of contextual findings and how IPV-related sexual violence manifests over time in the military.

There are several avenues for future research in addition to those highlighted above. Of note, this effort focused specifically on intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact. Though the prevalence of this form of violence was relatively low, we did not assess the broader scope of intimate partner violence such as other forms of physical, emotional, financial harm or abuse. At present, the Department does not have a mechanism for estimating the overall prevalence of IPV among military members. Doing so would require developing and deploying a new survey metric, which is a challenge during an era of declining survey response rates and survey fatigue. Such a metric would provide a fuller picture of IPV in the military, however, and the value and need for this information should be considered alongside all of the Department's other survey requirements and activities and prioritized according to the Department's strategic information needs and objectives.

Finally, there is potential additional research in this area leveraging existing data collected via the *WGR*. The current study used the definitions for intimate partner from DoD policy to define our populations of interest. However, we note that many victims of unwanted sexual contact were casually dating or "hooking up" with their alleged offender prior to experiencing unwanted sexual contact. For the purpose of our analyses to align with DoD definition of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact, these were not considered intimate partners. However, these types of unwanted sexual contact situations may differ in substantive ways from intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact and from other forms of unwanted sexual contact perpetrated by acquaintances or coworkers or strangers. Future research could focus specifically on unwanted sexual contact perpetrated by a casual dating partner, to further inform prevention and response activities.

Conclusion

The purpose of this report was to build foundational knowledge of intimate partner-related sexual violence in the military to inform prevention and response programs, policies, and procedures in accordance with IRC recommendations. In this report, we presented findings for intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact for women in the Active component, providing comparisons to unwanted sexual contacts that did not involve an intimate partner where applicable to determine whether the experience and correlates of unwanted sexual contact vary by intimate partner involvement. While findings suggest the prevalence of intimate partner-related unwanted sexual contact is relatively low among Active component women, it remains a concern that the Department continues to monitor and address, particularly as it relates to potentially lethal future behaviors such as homicide at the hands of an intimate partner. Notable differences emerged in contextual analyses of what these experiences look like that could be used for informing future prevention and response programs, policies, and procedures in the military.

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