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Defense Dept. Surveys Academy Sex Assaults

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1 Woman in 7 Reports Being Attacked

By Daniel de Vise, Washington Post Staff Writer

One female student in seven attending the nation's military academies last spring said she had been sexually assaulted since becoming a cadet or midshipman, according to a report on the first survey of sexual misconduct on the three campuses released yesterday by the Defense Department.

More than half the women studying at the Naval, Air Force and Army academies reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment on campus, according to survey responses. But few of those incidents, and only a third of the assaults, were reported to authorities. A new confidentiality policy for assault victims, also released yesterday, attempts to improve reporting of sex crimes on military campuses.

The survey, conducted largely in response to allegations of widespread sexual harassment and assault at the Air Force Academy in 2003, suggests a prevailing climate at the academies that worries military leaders. Too many students condone off-color jokes and unwanted sexual advances. Too few dare to confront classmates with their transgressions or to report them to anyone else, the survey shows.

"The very idea that anyone here at the academy family could be part of an environment that fosters sexual harassment, misconduct or even assault is of great concern to me; it keeps me awake at night," Vice Adm. Rodney Rempt, superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, said in a statement.

In March and April 2004, the Defense Department surveyed 1,906 women, or nearly all of the 1,971 who attend the three academies, along with a representative sample of 3,107 men. The survey attempted to go beyond general impressions, to "drill down and actually find out what happened" to each victim of assault or harassment, said Department of Defense Inspector General Joseph E. Schmitz, whose office conducted the survey.

The survey attempts to give a sense of the scale of sexual assault on military campuses and expands the research begun during the investigation of misconduct at the Air Force Academy. That review found that 142 female cadets had reported sexual assaults in a 10-year span.

Among the women surveyed last spring across the three academies, 262 students reported 302 incidents of sexual assault, including 94 instances of alleged rape. About 176 cases involved inappropriate touching and fondling. Men reported 55 sexual assaults. The incidents occurred from 1999 to 2004, mostly in dormitory rooms, and the offenders were primarily upperclassmen, according to the report.

"Our goal is to produce military leaders of character," Schmitz said at a news conference. "And obviously, sexual assaults are not a good indication of character. In fact, they're a very bad indication."

Two-thirds of the sexual assaults against men and women – 248 incidents – were not reported to authorities, the survey shows. Officials said this is a result of privacy concerns and myriad other factors that deter assault victims from reporting the crime in the general population.

But students reported other factors germane to their campus culture. One is fear among victims that they, too, could be punished for conduct related to the assault, such as underage drinking. Another is a sense of loyalty to classmates. A third is fear of reprisals by classmates or senior officers, according to the survey. Of the 96 cases that women reported to academy authorities, 29 led to criminal investigations, according to the survey. It was unclear how many led to actual charges against the alleged offender.

David S.C. Chu, undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, said the frequency of sexual assaults and the reluctance of victims to report the crimes seem to reflect trends among other college campuses, based on department research. Rape is considered the most under-reported violent crime in the nation at large; Schmitz said the share of such crimes reported within the academies is actually somewhat higher than in the civilian population.

Chu said: "I think the broad conclusion I would reach is that we are about where the college campuses are, tragically. That is not, frankly, terribly surprising. These individuals, these young men and women, come from civil society."

A 2004 study by the American College Health Association found comparable rates of sexual assault among female college students. But the military academies say they hold themselves to higher standards than the rest of society. Defense officials said they were particularly concerned about the widespread cynicism students revealed toward the honor codes that pervade their studies.

Substantial shares of students at all three schools reported that their classmates will break academy rules and even the honor code if they know they won't get caught.

Officials at the Air Force and Naval academies pointed to additional research suggesting that the campus climates may be improving over time. The spring 2004 survey was the second taken of Air Force cadets in consecutive years; the Naval Academy has surveyed midshipmen for several years. Both campuses reported steady gains in attitudes about the honor code, willingness to report sexual misconduct and faith in the reporting system.

"We're making progress," said Johnny Whitaker, Air Force Academy communications director.

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