

**Effects of Sexual Harassment on Job Satisfaction, Retention, Cohesion,  
Commitment and Unit Effectiveness: The Case of the Air Force**

**Executive Summary**

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Issue**

Over the last two and half decades, sexual harassment has been recognized as a serious problem in the workplace. This has become particularly noticeable with the increase in women entering the workforce in recent years as well as a societal emphasis on equal rights for women. Although men are sometimes victims of unwanted sexual attention, women are more likely to be sexually harassed. In 1981, the U.S. Merit System Protection Board (USMSPB) reported that 42% of all federally employed women surveyed indicated that they had been sexually harassed while working. Many of these women stated that they had been victimized repeatedly (USMSPB 1981). A follow-up study in 1987 also revealed that 42% of working women stated they had received unwanted sexual attention while on the job. USMSPB replicated the study in 1994 and found that 44% of the women surveyed indicated that they had been sexually harassed while at work. The incident of unwanted sexual attention had not decreased since the last government-wide survey. Moreover, in 1994, the percentages of women experiencing sexual harassment in the Navy (50%), Air Force (49%), and Army (46%) exceeded the national government average of 44% (See: USMSPB 1995).

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This problem is of concern to the Department of Defense (DOD) for at least two reasons, mission effectiveness and financial cost. Sexual harassment violates trusts and impairs unit cohesion and personnel readiness. It not only has an adverse affect on individual service members, but it affects the entire unit. This is probably reason enough for DOD to be vigilant in eliminating sexual harassment, still there is also a financial cost factor. Estimating the total cost of sexual harassment (reduction in productivity, incident, absenteeism, separation, replacement, transfer, legal, medical, and counseling costs) in the U.S. Army in 1988, researchers calculated the dollar value to be over \$250 million (see: Faley et al, 1999).

In the late 1980s, DOD began implementing several initiatives for the purpose of responding to and preventing sexual harassment. A Defense Equal Opportunity Council (DEOC) composed of senior officials to advise the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Force Management and Personnel on equal opportunity matters, was established in 1987. The following year, DOD administered a survey on sexual harassment of active duty military personnel. Survey results revealed that 64% of the women and 17% of the men reported at least one instance of unwanted, uninvited sexual attention while at work in the 12 months prior to taking the survey. The study was replicated in 1995, 2002, and 2006. Each replicated survey revealed that overall reporting rate of sexual harassment had declined. The 1995 study showed that 55% women and 14% men reported having experienced one or more incidents of sexual harassment the year prior to the survey, (U.S. DOD, 1995).

### **Current Status**

Since 1995, the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness has been charged with developing policies to prevent sexual harassment, as well as reviewing and following-up on all sexual harassment complaints in the services. With regard to education, the

Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI) provides sexual harassment training for all DOD military and civilian personnel assigned to EO, EEO and human relations programs. DEOMI also supports research on the equal opportunity and sexual harassment climate in the military services. In an effort to resolve issues of sexual harassment and to prevent future occurrences, it is important for DOD to examine both its causes and effects. Although in this paper I discuss both, only the effects of sexual harassment in Air Force units are measured.

In 2003, a Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) report revealed that sexual harassment had declined significantly from 1995 to 2002 (Lipari & Lancaster, 2003). This decline in the reports of sexual harassment may be partly attributable to DOD initiatives to eliminate such acts in the military. However, given the fact that many victims of sexual harassment do not report the incident to anyone, suggest that sexual harassment is underreported in today's military.

Focusing on 98 Air Force units, this study examines the relationship between sexual harassment, retention, unit cohesion, commitment, and unit effectiveness. Data for the analysis were drawn from the 2009 Defense Equal Opportunity Climate Surveys (DEOCS). The data were grouped by units according to AFECOID (a unit designator), and the effects of sexual harassment on job satisfaction, retention, unit effectiveness, and unit cohesion were examined. Among the findings, sexual harassment has a strong significant negative effect on perceived unit effectiveness and percent retention (at the .01 level), and a significant effect on unit cohesion (at the .05 level), but no significant effect on job satisfaction or unit commitment.

### **Recommendations**

The study results suggest that sexual harassment is still an issue in the military, strongly affecting retention, perceived unit effectiveness, and perceived unit cohesion. However,

limitation of the data does not allow for testing the frequency or intensity of the problem. It is recommended that a follow-up study be done testing the effects of sexual harassment on the other services. In addition, it is strongly recommended that additional items on sexual harassment be included in the Defense Equal Opportunity Climate Survey (DEOCS) allowing for a comparison of DEOCS findings with previous studies conducted by the U.S. Merit System Protection Board as well as those conducted by the Defense Manpower Data Center.

Among the additional items recommended are those that specify the type of behavior. For example, was the offense pressure of sexual favors, deliberate touching, and/or sexual teasing? To help determine the extent of the offense, service members should be asked whether or not they experienced attempted rape or assault. Respondents should also be asked whether the offense was committed by a fellow-employee or someone external to workplace. Items addressing these and other questions would allow for a more detailed analysis. It is recommended that items used in DMDC 2006 sexual harassment survey be incorporated into the present DEOCS.

Further, the Air Force should be surveyed by the DEOCS more extensively. As it is, the Air Force does not participate fully in the survey.